

HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS TO

THE SIXTEEN ELDERS

Composed by
**Pandita
Shakyashri**

Commented by
**Khenpo
Sodargye**



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Dedicated to
Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

*May your compassion and wisdom illuminate everywhere
and enlighten every sentient being.*

Khenpo Sodargye



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**Homage and Offerings to
the Sixteen Elders
(Root Text)**

Composed by Pandita Shakyashri

Root Text

Buddha Shakyamuni, the Incomparable One

Verse 1

We pay homage to the incomparable one whom we never
tire of gazing upon,¹
Whose beautiful form is the color of gold,
With one face, two hands and is seated in cross-legged
posture,
While making the gestures of touching the earth and
resting in equanimity:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The First Elder: Angaja

Verse 2

We pay homage to the noble elder Angaja,
Who dwells on the great snow-capped peak of Kailash,

¹The English verses are excerpted from *A Brief Practice of Paying Homage and Making Offerings to the Sixteen Elders* compiled by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo translated by Lotsawa House.

Surrounded by one thousand three hundred arhats,
And holds an incense burner and fly whisk:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Second Elder: Ajita

Verse 3

We pay homage to the noble elder Ajita,
Who dwells in the crystal forest on Sage Mountain,
Surrounded by a hundred arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Third Elder: Vanavasin

Verse 4

We pay homage to the noble elder Vanavasin,
Who dwells in a cave on Seven Leaf Mountain,
Surrounded by one thousand four hundred arhats,
And holds a fly whisk while making the threatening
 gesture:

Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Fourth Elder: Kalika

Verse 5

We pay homage to the noble elder Kalika,
Who dwells on Copper Island in Jambudvipa,
Surrounded by one thousand one hundred arhats,
And holds golden earrings:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher
may be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Fifth Elder: Vajriputra

Verse 6

We pay homage to the elder Vajriputra,
Who dwells in the land of Sri Lanka,
Surrounded by a thousand great arhats,
And holds a fly whisk while making the threatening
gesture:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Sixth Elder: Shribhadra

Verse 7

We pay homage to the noble elder Shribhadra,
Who dwells on an island in the Yamuna river,
Surrounded by one thousand two hundred arhats,
And makes the gestures of teaching the Dharma and
equanimity:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Seventh Elder: Kanakavatsa

Verse 8

We pay homage to the noble elder Kanakavatsa,
Who dwells in the supreme land of Kashmir,
Surrounded by five hundred great arhats,
And holds a jeweled chain:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Eighth Elder: Kanakabharadvaja

Verse 9

We pay homage to Kanakabharadvaja,
Who dwells on the western continent of Godaniya,
Surrounded by seven hundred great arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two
 hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Ninth Elder: Bakula

Verse 10

We pay homage to the noble elder Bakula,
Who dwells on the northern continent of Uttarakuru,
Surrounded by nine hundred great arhats,
And holds a mongoose with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Tenth Elder: Rahula

Verse 11

We pay homage to the noble elder Rahula,
Who dwells in the land of Priyangu,
Surrounded by one thousand one hundred arhats,
And holds a jeweled crown:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Eleventh Elder: Ksudrapanthaka

Verse 12

We pay homage to the elder Ksudrapanthaka,
Who dwells on Vulture Peak mountain,
Surrounded by one thousand nine hundred arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two
 hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Twelfth Elder: Pindolabharadvaja

Verse 13

We pay homage to Pindolabharadvaja,
Who dwells on the eastern continent of Purvavideha,
Surrounded by a thousand arhats,
And holds a text and alms bowl:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Thirteenth Elder: Panthaka

Verse 14

We pay homage to the noble elder Panthaka,
Who dwells in the heaven of Thirty-Three,
Surrounded by nine hundred great arhats,
And makes the gesture of teaching the Dharma while
 holding a text:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Fourteenth Elder: Nagasena

Verse 15

We pay homage to the noble elder Nagasena,
Who dwells on the slopes of Mount Meru,
Surrounded by one thousand two hundred arhats,
And holds a vase and monk's staff:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Fifteenth Elder: Gopaka

Verse 16

We pay homage to the noble elder Gopaka,
Who dwells on Vihula, king of mountains,
Surrounded by one thousand four hundred arhats,
And holds a text in his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Sixteenth Elder: Abhedya

Verse 17

We pay homage to the noble elder Abhedya,
Who dwells among the king-like Snowy Peaks,
Surrounded by a thousand arhats,
And holds an enlightenment stupa:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Seventeenth Elder: Upasaka Dharmatala

Verse 18

We pay homage to the noble upasaka Dharmatala,
Whose hair is in a topknot and who carries volumes of
 Dharma,
Who sees Amitabha in the sky before him,
And who holds a fly whisk and vase:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Four Great Kings

Verse 19

We pay homage to the Four Great Kings,
Who are mighty and wear the armor of diligence,
And who guard well the teachings of Buddha
In the four directions: east, south, west and north!
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!²

²The last two lines are added based on Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche's Chinese translation from Tibetan.

Commentary on
Homage and Offerings
to the Sixteen Elders

by Khenpo Sodargye



Lecture One

INTRODUCTION

Today, we will begin our study of the prayer known as, *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*. I have never taught on this prayer before, so this will be my first time. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, we consider this to be a prayer, a praise, and a practice of paying homage. It is very well known throughout the Tibetan regions and held in high regard by all the major Tibetan Buddhist schools.

There are only nineteen verses in the prayer, which may seem quite brief to you. However, there is quite a lot to cover if we are to elaborate on each verse. I will be teaching based on my own understanding as well as quoting from a number of reliable sources.

Origin of the Teaching

According to the historical records of Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism, before Buddha Shakyamuni displayed his final act of parinirvana, many arhats such as Maudgalyayana passed into nirvana, one after another. Had all the arhats passed into nirvana

in a similar way, the Dharma teachings would have soon come to an end. Therefore the Buddha entrusted the Dharma teachings to sixteen great arhats and their retinues, requesting them to remain in the world and not enter into nirvana, so that they could protect the Dharma for as long as time endures. The sixteen great arhats agreed to do this, vowing to remain in the world and to continually uphold the Dharma through their blessings and power. For this reason, it is very important to pray to the Sixteen Arhats.

Actually, I thought about translating and commenting on this prayer while H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was still alive, but somehow the conditions never quite came together at that time. I believe now, however, we have very good causes and conditions for this to happen. Last year, several of my Dharma friends at the Academy requested me to translate the prayer. Also, while I was in Beijing some time ago, some people brought me a text of the prayer from the Vajra Seat in India and requested me to teach on it. Then, when I was in Yunnan, I obtained a copy of Ding Guanpeng's paintings of the Sixteen Arhats, on which Emperor Qianlong's verses of praise for each of the arhats clearly appears. The original copy is a very valuable item in the collection of the Beijing Palace Museum.

So based on these auspicious circumstances, I think we have a very good opportunity now to propagate this prayer. I hope that,

through this teaching, all Buddhists will join in praying to the Sixteen Arhats, with the aspiration that all the great masters of all schools will live long and always turn the Wheel of Dharma, and that the Dharma will flourish and spread throughout the world.

Significance of the Prayer

Despite the importance of this prayer for ensuring the longevity of the great masters and for the flourishing of the Dharma, many Buddhists have probably never even heard of it. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a tradition of reciting this prayer whilst making abundant offerings of the five outer substances (lamps, flowers, water and so forth), in order to pray that the great masters will live long and the Dharma will continue to prosper. A vast amount of merit can also be accumulated in this way. Many great masters in India will recite this prayer in Bodh Gaya every day from morning until night for about a month each year.

While H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was still alive, Larung Gar held many collective recitations of this prayer in order to pray for the long life of His Holiness. When His Holiness was giving teachings at the Namdroling Monastery in southern India during his trip to India in 1990, there was an elderly practitioner living nearby who was very skilled at mirror divination, a type of prediction used in Tibetan Buddhism that yields very accurate

results. One day, around dusk, I went to see him and asked what prayers we needed to recite for the long life of His Holiness. After performing the mirror divination, he said that we needed to recite the prayer of *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders* 100,000 times. When we were in Nepal later, I bought a well-printed, Tibetan loose-leaf text of the prayer. After we returned to Larung Gar, the whole sangha recited this prayer together many times, over a long period of time.

Many Buddhists supplicate their teachers, saying, “Please remain long in this world and always turn the Wheel of Dharma.” But merely saying this won’t necessarily prolong a teacher’s life. It would be far more effective to recite this prayer. By relying upon the boundless miraculous power and blessings of the Arhats, as well as the power of their aspirations and the truth of their words, the lifespan of all great masters who genuinely uphold the Dharma will be prolonged. Also, if we wish for the Dharma to spread throughout the world, we should supplicate these noble beings. Through their power, the Dharma will flourish everywhere, even where it has not yet reached.

Whatever we aim to do in life—whether it be a mundane task or a Dharma activity—it is not enough just to think or speak about it, we need to combine our action with skillful means. Without skillful means, we won’t be able to achieve our goal. This prayer of

Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders is a very effective skillful means for ensuring that the great masters will live long and that the Dharma will continue to flourish. This is the main reason for my teaching this prayer.

Understanding the Arhats Properly

As Buddhists, it is essential that we know something about the virtuous qualities and deeds of these sixteen great disciples of the Buddha, so that we can pray to them properly. Most Han Buddhist temples contain shrines that feature statues of the Sixteen Arhats, and in nearly all Tibetan Buddhist temples the Sixteen Arhats are depicted on wall paintings. In truth, most people lack even the most basic knowledge of who these great beings are and how to pray or pay homage to them.

It is also important for non-Buddhists to know something about the life stories and qualities of these great arhats. They will then understand that they are not simply myths, the result of someone's imagination, but actually existed in history, as attested by numerous reliable Buddhist sources. It is sad to observe how some people, even some Buddhists, can be very hasty in making judgments. If something doesn't fit their preconceptions, they immediately reject it and say it is just a myth or superstition. They are not interested in a careful study of the historical records of Buddhism; instead they

dismiss these accounts as fictitious tales. That is a very prejudiced and unreasonable way of thinking.

What I wish to emphasize here is the crucial importance of a proper understanding of Buddhism. Since many people today don't understand the teachings of Buddhism properly, they stray ever further away from the truth and end up becoming more and more superstitious. I hope that through this short series of lectures, we can all deepen our understanding of the Sixteen Arhats, and of Buddhism more generally. We will then understand how there is far much more to the Sixteen Arhats than just the set of paintings that we see in temples. These paintings point to actual historical events that took place a long time ago; events that are intimately tied to our own lives today and the continuance of the Dharma. If we fail to understand this, it would be like taking medicine without knowing its ingredients or sources—if that were the case, what right would we have to say anything about it?

BACKGROUND TO THE PRAYER

The Title and the Author

The title of this prayer is, *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*. The “Sixteen Elders” refer to the Sixteen Arhats who vowed before Buddha Shakyamuni to uphold the Dharma teachings. In the prayer, each arhat is addressed as a “noble elder” since they are all considered to be enlightened beings. The prayer also includes supplications to Buddha Shakyamuni at the beginning and to Upasaka Dharmatala and the Four Great Kings at the end, however its main focus is the Sixteen Arhats.

“Arhat” is a Sanskrit word that refers to the ultimate result of the Shravakayana, though it can also be used as an epithet for the Buddha. Its Tibetan translation is “drachompa”. According to Buddhist scriptures such as, *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the word arhat has three meanings: 1) “destroyer of enemies”, meaning arhats have eliminated their enemies, the destructive emotions; 2) “worthy of offerings”, i.e. arhats are worthy of receiving offerings from all beings in the universe; and 3) “free of birth”, meaning

that since the arhats have attained nirvana, they will never again take rebirth.

This prayer to the Sixteen Arhats was composed by Shakyashri, a renowned Pandita from Kashmir. Each of the nineteen verses starts with a homage and ends with the supplication, “Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may be secure, and the teachings may flourish and spread!”.

History of the Arhats

1 The Sixteen and Eighteen Arhats

Ever since Buddhism spread to the Han regions, there has been mention of the Sixteen Arhats in several prominent Buddhist texts such as, *Treatise of Entering the Mahayana Path (Mahayanavatara)*. These texts do not, however, give specific details about each arhat, such as their name and where they lived. This information only emerged later in the Tang Dynasty when Master Xuanzang translated the *Nandimitravadana*, a text recounted by the great arhat Nandimitra. This text clearly presents the name, place of residence and number of followers, of each of the Sixteen Arhats. Following its translation, the Sixteen Elders became widely known throughout the Han regions.

In the late Tang Dynasty, we start to see accounts of Eighteen Arhats. In terms of the other two that were added to the list of the Sixteen Arhats, both Emperor Qianlong and Changkya Khutukhtu agreed that they should be Mahakashyapa and Maitreya. The latter, Maitreya, was also known by the name of Budai Monk—a famous Han Buddhist Chan master who lived in the Late Liang Dynasty.

Meanwhile in Tibetan Buddhism, we also find mention of both Sixteen as well as Eighteen Arhats. The list of Sixteen Arhats in Tibetan Buddhism is no different from that of Han Buddhism. There are only minor differences regarding their place of residence, gestures, or size of retinue. Later on, the noble upasaka Dharmatala was added to the list, so it became common in Tibetan Buddhism to pray to the Sixteen Arhats and upasaka Dharmatala. How did this come to be? The practice of paying homage and making offerings to the Sixteen Elders originated in the Han regions and only spread to the Tibetan regions at a later time. The ritual tradition came accompanied by stories of how the Sixteen Arhats were invited to the Han regions by Emperor Suzong of the Tang Dynasty. According to some sources, the envoy of Suzong was the noble Dharmatala, a Chinese lay practitioner, and this is the reason why his name was added to the homage.

There are other sources that identify the envoy as an enlightened Chinese monk. Emperor Qianlong believed this monk to be Budai Monk, an emanation of Maitreya. Because of this, many sets of traditional Tibetan thangkas include both the Chinese monk, Budai, as well as the Upsaka Dharmatala, so bringing the total to Eighteen Arhats. I have seen thangkas from the Derge Parkhang that contain all these Eighteen Arhats, with Maitreya amongst them.

In short, in Tibetan Buddhism, the Sixteen Arhats always appear together with Dharmatala and Budai Monk. Together they make up the Eighteen Arhats. So the concept of Eighteen Arhats also exists in Tibetan Buddhism. But in both Tibetan and Han Buddhism, the commonly accepted listing is that of Sixteen Arhats.

2 The Five Hundred Arhats

In Han Buddhism, as well as the Sixteen Arhats and Eighteen Arhats, we also hear mention of Five Hundred Arhats. You may have seen statues of these arhats when visiting a Han Buddhist temple, since several great Chinese masters established a tradition of including them in their monasteries. I once visited Baoguang Temple in Chengdu which houses one of the largest arhat shrines in China. There are statues there of all Five Hundred Arhats. I was told during my visit that the 295th arhat was Emperor Kangxi and

the 360th arhat was Emperor Qianlong. My book, *Records on Mount Wutai*, contains many stories about these Five Hundred Arhats.

Some scholars say that the reference here to five hundred isn't intended as a specific number and just means that there were many of them. However the Five Hundred Arhats are clearly mentioned in several sutras, including the Vinaya. In particular, *The Names of the Five Hundred Arhats*, identifies each of the Five Hundred Arhats very clearly.

Five hundred is in fact a special number and often appears in other contexts in the Buddhist sutras and shastras. *The Different Aspects of the Sutras and Vinaya*, for example, recounts a story in which five hundred geese overheard the voice of the Buddha whilst he was giving a Dharma teaching. Through this merit, they were all reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. After taking rebirth there, they came down to Jambudvīpa to hear teachings from the Buddha and attained the result of stream-enterer.

Similarly, Master Xuanzang's *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* tells the story of five hundred bats who listened to someone reciting the Abhidharma Pitaka. Since they all listened so attentively, after they died they were all reborn as humans and attained arhathood within that lifetime. *The Treatise on the Great Prajnaparamita* recounts how at one time five hundred rishis resided in

a mountain and practiced shamatha (calm abiding) together. When they heard a woman singing, however, they became entranced by her voice and lost their meditative concentration.

Why does the number five hundred appear so often? It is because back then in India, five hundred was considered to be a special number. It is similar to how we use one hundred today as a standard unit of measurement. We might also, therefore, consider one hundred to be a special number too. In the same way, five hundred was often used as a standard unit of measurement in those ancient times.

KEEPING AN OPEN AND PURE MIND

Before we begin with the actual verses, I'd like to emphasize a few important points to you. As you approach learning about this prayer, I hope you will keep a very open and pure mind towards the Sixteen Arhats. Please try to avoid any prejudiced or critical frames of mind. These are the points I'd like to share with you.

Arhats Are Supreme Objects of Homage

Firstly, whether we practice Han Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism, we should definitely know that these arhats are worthy recipients of our homage. There are some Buddhists from both traditions who think that arhats are not particularly worthy of respect since arhathood is only a Hinayana attainment. Since they themselves practice the higher paths of Mahayana and Vajrayana, they tend to be dismissive of the arhats, as if they have achieved a higher realization than arhathood. This kind of attitude is totally wrong.

It is true that arhathood is a result of the Hinayana, but at least arhats have realized the selflessness of the individual, and that is no small thing. It's quite easy to check whether we have reached that

realization ourselves. Whenever we experience negative emotions or suffering, the pains and struggles that we self-evidently go through are clear signs that we haven't realized so much as a fraction of the selflessness of the individual!

Moreover, not all arhats are actually followers of the Hinayana. Some arhats are emanated by bodhisattvas in order to liberate sentient beings. We know this from the *Universal Gate Chapter* of the *Lotus Sutra*, in which it is said that Avalokiteshvara emanates in various forms in order to benefit beings. If the form of a buddha is beneficial to beings, Avalokiteshvara will emanate in the form of a buddha. If the form of a bodhisattva is beneficial to beings, Avalokiteshvara will emanate as a bodhisattva. If the form of a pratyekabuddha is beneficial to beings, Avalokiteshvara will emanate as a pratyekabuddha. If the form of an arhat is beneficial to beings, Avalokiteshvara will emanate as an arhat. Avalokiteshvara also emanates in any number of other forms such as kings, rishis, brahmins, beggars, and bhikkhus, in order to benefit sentient beings. We should, therefore, definitely respect these Sixteen Arhats.

The Arhats Can Appear in Different Forms

Secondly, we should not restrict ourselves to thinking that the arhats must always appear in a certain fixed form. The way that the Sixteen Arhats appear in the Tibetan and Han Buddhist traditions

can differ. Overall, the depictions in both traditions—whether they be in the form of statues, thangkas or paintings—are all to be respected. Take Ding Guanpeng’s paintings as an example, the garments worn by the arhats are drawn in exquisite detail.

Since the time of the late Tang Dynasty, many Han Buddhist artists chose to add an artistic touch to their portraits of the Sixteen Arhats. For example, they would typically depict them as old monks. Of course, it is difficult to say whether or not they actually looked like that, but as long as you have faith, you will be inspired by seeing them in that way. Tibetan Buddhist artists, on the other hand, tend to portray the arhats as being younger in age and very dignified in form.

At any rate, I am quite certain that when Indian practitioners visualize the arhats, they see them as Indians. When Tibetan practitioners pray to the arhats, they visualize them wearing Tibetan dress and jewelry. When a Han Chinese practitioner visualizes the arhats, they appear to them as Han Chinese. We can’t say that one form is correct and another is wrong. Since even a dancer dresses up differently when performing to different audiences, it’s no surprise that arhats, who have unobstructed miraculous powers, can appear in any number of forms in front of different beings.

It's similar to how Buddha Shakyamuni appears making different hand gestures, such as the gesture of equanimity or the gesture of teaching the Dharma. There can be one hundred, one thousand, countless even gestures of Buddha Shakyamuni. He can also be depicted standing or sitting. All these different ways that the Buddha manifested himself are clearly apparent in his biography.

Understanding the Stories of the Arhats Correctly

Thirdly, we should try to develop faith so that we can hear the stories and analogies about the arhats in the correct way. Many people today aren't able to maintain a pure mind and easily fall into negative ways of thinking when they listen to a Dharma talk. In the *Treasury of the Dharmadhatu*, one of the *Seven Treasuries*, it says that when hearing the analogy that our mind is like the ocean, foolish people will think that since the ocean is blue and made of water, the mind is therefore blue in color and liquid in form, just like water. Obviously, that is a wrong interpretation.

Actually, it's never possible for two things to be completely the same in every aspect, so any analogy between two things is only based on a particular aspect that is common to both. The analogy that our mind is like the ocean signifies that the nature of mind

is vast, boundless and clear, just like the ocean. Wise people will understand this correctly.

Everyone differs in their capacities and merit. Those who have roots of virtue will benefit from reading a Buddhist scripture or listening to a Buddhist story. If you have enough merit, when you hear stories about the buddhas and bodhisattvas and their miraculous deeds, your faith in them will increase enormously. But if you're a person with distorted views, you will most likely think they are merely fabricated, imaginary tales.

It's similar to the different reactions that people had when we studied the *White Lotus: An Extensive Biography of the Lives of Buddha Shakyamuni*. Those who had roots of virtue and a good foundation in Buddhist teachings were deeply moved by these stories and benefitted from every word and sentence. On the other hand, people who had a poor foundation in the Buddhist teachings and who were very critically-minded only found faults in what they heard and generated even more negative emotions.

Overall, it's very important that we understand each story and analogy in the correct way. Otherwise, even if Buddha Shakyamuni or another great sage were to appear before us, we would only find fault in what they said. For example, renowned as Einstein and Newton were, when they were invited to explain their scientific

theories, people who disliked them would still find faults in what they said. Their criticisms, however, were purely arbitrary and not based on any proper kind of understanding. Listening to the Dharma is just the same. This is why the sutras say that faith is extremely important when listening to Dharma teachings.



Buddha Shakyamuni

BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

THE INCOMPARABLE ONE

We pay homage to the incomparable one whom we
never tire of gazing upon,
Whose beautiful form is the color of gold,
With one face, two hands and is seated in cross-legged
posture,
While making the gestures of touching the earth and
resting in equanimity:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

This first verse is a homage and praise to Buddha Shakyamuni. We pay homage to Buddha Shakyamuni, our root teacher, the founder of Buddhism, whose golden magnificent form is beautiful to behold. He is adorned with all the marks of a buddha; we never tire of gazing upon him. The Buddha has one face, two hands, and is seated in a cross-legged posture. His right hand makes the gesture of touching the earth, the most common way Buddha Shakyamuni appears in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. At the same time, his left hand makes the gesture of resting in equanimity. In Emperor Qianlong's verses of praise to the Sixteen Arhats, Buddha Shakyamuni is described as holding an alms bowl in his hands which rest in the mudra of meditation.

The physical form of the Buddha is beautiful beyond compare, we never tire of gazing upon him. I have always had such a feeling myself. Ever since my childhood, I have felt a deep sense of awe wherever and whenever I see the golden statue of Buddha Shakyamuni. I never tire of gazing upon him. No other person or object has the same effect on me. Perhaps I feel this way because of my roots of virtue, or perhaps everyone feels this same way too?

The Matchlessness of the Buddha

In *The History of the Transmission of the Dharma Treasury*, there's a story that clearly describes the matchless beauty of the Buddha's

form. Around one hundred years after the Buddha's parinirvana, there lived a very great master called Upagupta who possessed the three knowledges, the six supercognitions, and all other noble qualities, such that he became known as "the perfect buddha without marks".

Once, Upagupta thought to himself, "I have already realized the Buddha's teaching and seen the Buddha's dharmakaya, but I have never seen the Buddha's physical body with all its magnificent marks." He was deeply saddened by this fact and set out to learn more about the Buddha's physical body. Later, he learned that there was a 120-year-old bhikkhuni still alive who had seen the Buddha in person, so he sent a messenger to inform her that he would like to pay her a visit.

On hearing of his imminent arrival, the bhikkhuni placed a bowl full of oil behind the door of her home. When Upagupta entered through the door, several drops of oil spilled from the bowl because of his rough way of walking. Having taken his seat, Upagupta asked the bhikkhuni, "I didn't have the good fortune to see the Buddha in person while he was alive, please tell me—how did the bhikkhus conduct themselves around him, when they were in his presence?"

The bhikkhuni replied, “The conduct of the bhikkhus back then was completely different from that of the bhikkhus today. In the presence of the Buddha, even if the group of six bhikkhus who had the roughest demeanor entered this house, not a single drop of oil had spilled from that bowl. You are a great master of the present time, endowed with excellent wisdom, yet when you entered this house, you spilled several drops of oil from the bowl. From this, we can see that back then, during the time of the Buddha, the conduct of the bhikkhus was exemplary.”

On hearing the bhikkhuni’s words, Upagupta felt great remorse and was deeply ashamed of himself, but the bhikkhuni told him that it was not unusual for the virtue of beings to decline over time. Upagupta then asked her, “What was the Buddha like when you actually saw him? Was his body as magnificent as they say?”

The bhikkhuni replied, “When I was twenty years old and preparing to get married, I lost my golden hairpin one night in a field of thick, long grass. I couldn’t find it no matter how hard I looked, not even when I used a lamp to light the way. At that time, the Buddha happened to pass by. The golden light shining from his body was like that of hundreds of suns combined, piercing the darkness with brilliant light. Even the tiniest object became visible because of that golden light and so I was able to find my hairpin very easily. That’s what the Buddha was like, he was indeed amazing.”

Through the bhikkhuni's recollections, Upagupta learned of the magnificence of the Buddha's form and the bhikkhus' conduct back at the Buddha's time.

As we can see from this story, the magnificence of the Buddha's form is indeed unmatched by any other kind of being. The matchless quality of the Buddha is not restricted just to his physical form—he is also incomparable in terms of his compassion, his wisdom, and his ability to liberate sentient beings. This isn't just some sort of boastful claim made by the followers of the Buddha, but an undeniable truth based on clear reason and evidence.

Unfortunately, people who are ignorant of the Buddha's qualities often fail to understand who he really is, and merely think of him as some sort of famous historical figure, like a president, or celebrity, or a great writer like Lu Xun or Guo Moruo of current times. I came across a ludicrous book today in which the author wrote about Buddha Shakyamuni as if he were an ordinary person. Even worse, the author seemed to consider himself as being an equal of the Buddha. He wrote down several proverbs and signed his name underneath, along with his nationality, "Chinese". He then cited a quote from the Buddha followed by the acknowledgment, "Shakyamuni—an Indian." He also quoted Einstein and incorrectly identified him as being British.

In truth, no ordinary person can be compared to the Buddha, not even someone as renowned as Einstein. Anyone can find out about the supreme qualities of the Buddha by looking into the Buddhist Canon and seeing all the teachings that he gave.

Paying Attention to Our Conduct

I mentioned earlier that the old bhikkhuni had said to Upagupta that it was normal for the conduct of bhikkhus to deteriorate over time. I'd like to say more about this point. When I was away from the Academy some time ago, I heard cases of some monastics behaving improperly. On the one hand, such happenings are to be expected in this degenerate age, but on the other hand, it may be a sign that some of the monastics don't have true renunciation. They sought ordination because of anxieties or troubles in their worldly life and once their anxieties were allayed, they regressed back to their old habits. Some lay practitioners also behave improperly.

I hope that as Buddhists living in this degenerate age, monastics and lay practitioners alike will pay special attention to their conduct—the way they dress, the way they talk, and how they act generally. Otherwise, this kind of improper behavior may become the cause for other people to act in negative ways.

For example, because they haven't learned the precepts very well, some monastics behave just like ordinary people. Unfortunately,

some people cannot see any positive benefit in being a monastic practitioner. They cannot see any virtue in renouncing worldly affairs, going to live in a solitary place, or wearing the robes of the ordained sangha. Instead, they only focus on the faults of the monastics and condemn them for just one improper word or act. “That monastic just spoke improperly! Look at how his eyes roll around! He’s definitely not a well-behaved monk!” Moreover, based on their perception of just one monastic, they conclude that all monastics must be bad. There are people who blindly accumulate negative karma by thinking like this.

Of course, sometimes this is due to their own negative emotions and distorted way of thinking, which we don’t need to argue against. However, there are also times when our own actions—our behavior or what we say—are responsible for triggering wrong views in other people and destroying their roots of virtue. Therefore, we should be very careful about how we conduct ourselves.

Praying for Great Masters and the Dharma

We pray to Buddha Shakyamuni, as well as to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past, present and future, in all ten directions, to grant their blessings so that the teachers who truly propagate the Dharma and benefit sentient beings may always remain in the world and not abandon beings who suffer without relent. At

the same time, we pray sincerely to the Buddha that through the immeasurable power of his blessings, the noble teachings may flourish throughout the world in all ten directions.

There is enormous power when we make sincere, heartfelt aspirations in this way. We easily get impressed by the power of nature, like the flow of water or movement of air, however, the mind's power of aspiration is even greater. If everyone attending this lecture joined together and prayed sincerely to Buddha Shakyamuni, with the wish that the life of all the great masters might be secure and their lifespan increase, even for just one hour or one day, the power of that aspiration would be tremendous.

It is important, therefore, that we pray regularly to the Buddha for the long life of all great masters. H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once prayed for the long life of a great master, saying that although that master was already very old and wouldn't necessarily live for much longer, yet still, even by remaining for just one additional day, such great masters would bring immense benefit to countless beings, either directly or indirectly.

It is also extremely important that we regularly pray for the continued flourishing of the Dharma. When the Dharma teachings increase and spread in the world, beings will definitely find harmony and happiness. The entire world will be at peace and enjoy

good circumstances, resulting in a better and more propitious world for all of us.



Elder Angaja

ANGAJA

THE FIRST ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Angaja,
Who dwells on the great snow-capped peak of Kailash,
Surrounded by one thousand three hundred arhats,
And holds an incense burner and fly whisk:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The first arhat that we pay homage to is noble elder Angaja. Angaja dwells on the snow-capped peak of sacred Mount Kailash, along with 1,300 arhats who are his followers. He holds an incense burner and fly whisk in his hands. We pray to Angaja and his retinue so that all the Dharma teachers in all ten directions may live long and the nectar-like Dharma teachings, the sole source of benefit to sentient beings, may flourish everywhere. We should pray sincerely in this way, as regularly as possible, and not just simply mouth the words. By making sincere prayers like this, especially when we visit sacred places or participate in large Dharma gatherings, not only will our wishes be fulfilled, we will also accumulate immeasurable merit.

In the *Nandimitravadana*, Angaja is said to reside on a mountain called Broadside. We should not be surprised to find different accounts of where an arhat lives. Since these elders have attained boundless miraculous abilities and powers, it's perfectly possible for them to appear in different places. It's equally understandable that there should be different claims as to their number of followers. Their retinue may, for example, have grown over time, in the same way that the number of people studying here at our Academy has increased over the past few decades.

The incense burner and fly whisk that Angaja holds were offered to him by local mountain gods and non-humans while he was

at Mount Kailash; they later became his symbols. Whoever sees, thinks of, or visualizes his symbols will purify their six root disturbing emotions and twenty subsidiary disturbing emotions, and obtain the sweet fragrance of pure discipline and the wisdom of genuine realization.

Atisha and the Sixteen Arhats

1 Sixteen Honorable Guests

In both Han Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, we find many stories about meetings between great masters and the arhats. In particular, there are many well-known stories in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition about Atisha's encounters with the Sixteen Arhats. This story, for example, took place while Atisha was staying at Drak Yerpa monastery. One day, Atisha told his disciple, Changchub Rinchen, who was also the cook, "Today, sixteen honorable guests are coming. Please make sure you prepare a meal for them."

Changchub Rinchen thought, "How can I prepare a meal for sixteen people just by myself?" (This reminds me of some of the volunteers who work in the kitchen at our Academy. They often worry that the food being prepared for the sangha won't be sufficient and say things like, "People eat so much here. I really have a hard time cooking enough for them. I get up at 4 am and after hours of preparation, they swarm in at 8 am to take their meals. I don't even

get to eat breakfast myself.”) Anyway, even though Changchub Rinchen was very compliant most of the time, in this instance, he said, “If sixteen people are coming for lunch, I won’t be able to prepare the meal all by myself. Please ask Dromtonpa to help me with the cooking.” However, Atisha replied, “Dromtonpa has already left to invite the guests. You will have to cook the meals on your own.” Around noon time Dromtonpa came, along with sixteen elders who all dressed in Indian clothing. They sat down and ate their meal together. After the meal, Atisha invited them to practice the Dharma together. From that time onwards, Atisha established the tradition of reciting prayers and making special offerings to the Sixteen Arhats on the 15th and 30th days of the Tibetan calendar.

2 Encounters with Angaja

Of all the Sixteen Arhats, Atisha must have had a special karmic connection with Angaja since we find many more stories about their encounters together.

This is a story about Lord Atisha’s meeting with Angaja at Mount Kailash. Once, while Atisha and his students were circumambulating Mount Kailash, they came upon a rocky place that was full of footprints left by Buddha Shakyamuni and many arhats. Upon arriving there, they could clearly hear the sound of a wooden rod

being beaten. Atisha said, "Angaja and his followers are just about to have lunch. Let's go and share their meal!"

On another occasion, while visiting Nyetang, an old Indian monk approached Atisha and started to converse with him in Sanskrit. They remained deep in conversation for quite a long time. After the old monk finally left, people asked Atisha who he was and Atisha told them that he was Angaja.

Finally, this story comes from the time Atisha was staying at Drak Yerpa monastery. One day, Atisha was talking to Dromtonpa, when an old monk approached and prostrated himself before them. The old monk said that he would follow Atisha's instructions and commit himself to virtuous deeds; he would do this by transforming himself into a young monk so he could study for a year or two in a monastery somewhere else. Having made that declaration he then said, "It's now time for me to return to Mount Kailash!" and vanished into thin air. The monks who had been watching all this were utterly amazed and asked Dromtonpa, "Who was that old monk? Where did he just go?" Dromtonpa replied that the old monk was Venerable Angaja and that he had returned to sacred Mount Kailash. So keep in mind that should you have the opportunity to go to Mount Kailash one day, there's a good chance you might see the elder Angaja there!

Khenpo Chopa's Misadventures at Mount Kailash

Staying with Mount Kailash, there's another story I'd like to share with you. Mount Kailash is a very tall, snow-capped mountain, and the source from which several major rivers flow, such as the Indus and Ganges. Its peak is visible far into the surrounds—we can even see it from certain high vantage points in Lhasa. Several religions regard Mount Kailash to be a very sacred place. Both Hindus and Buddhists, for example, consider it to be a holy mountain. Until today, Mount Kailash remains home to many spiritual practitioners who have abandoned their worldly life. Milarepa, for example, is said to have stayed there.

Mount Kailash is close to the border between Nepal and China and many hidden pathways that connect the two countries pass through there. Because of this, many people who don't have a passport try to cross the border by following one of those routes. But this is a very risky undertaking because there are many Chinese and Nepali border guards stationed in that area.

There was a khenpo at our Academy called Chopa who once tried to go to India via Mount Kailash without a passport. He took one of those paths accompanied by two other people. After traveling for a long time, when he thought they had crossed the Chinese-Nepali

border, Khenpo Chopa said, “We have arrived in Nepal. We are free of worries now.” Just then, the khenpo, who is a very tall man, sat down on a rock and started to sing a vajra song about fearlessness at the top of his voice. This immediately attracted the attention of the border guards, however, and the khenpo and his friends were all arrested and imprisoned for one or two months.

Perhaps he had sung too loudly. He certainly had a very strong voice! Once, Khenpo Chopa joined us on a visit to Mount Wutai. He recited prayers to Manjushri and Vimalamitra while circum-ambulating the Great White Stupa and his voice was so loud that we could hear him from as far away as the Shancai Cave. When we were all together at Larung Gar, Khenpo Chopa once taught *The Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas* in the district of Mandala. Even though we were staying in another district, quite some distance away, we could still hear his voice when he was teaching!

Around the time that Khenpo Chopa was trying to cross the border, I was accompanying His Holiness on a visit to India. When Khenpo Chopa and his companions finally managed to arrive in India, they came to see His Holiness and told him about the difficulties they had experienced on their travels. Khenpo later went to the U.S. and passed into nirvana there.

The One Born in Fire

The life story of Angaja can be found in the Vinaya, in the section called the *Ksudrakavastu*, *Minor Division*. Here, Angaja is referred to as “Fire-Born”, since he was born whilst an intense fire raged around him. The story is quite long but I will try to summarize it for you.

1 The Buddha’s Prophecies about Angaja

During the time of the Buddha, there was a wealthy elder called Shanxian who lived in the city of Rajagriha. He was very devoted to Jainism. One morning, Buddha Shakyamuni was out begging for alms and passed by his house. Shanxian immediately thought he should present his wife to the Buddha and ask for a prediction, since his wife had just become pregnant. Shanxian introduced her to the Buddha and said, “My wife is pregnant. Will the child be a boy or a girl? What will become of the child in the future?” The Buddha replied, “Your child will certainly be a boy. He will bring glory and prosperity to your family. He will become very wealthy but will later wish to become a monk in order to follow my teachings and attain arhathood.” After making these prophecies, the Buddha left.

A nearby Jain saw the Buddha passing by Shanxian’s house and thought, “Shanxian is my greatest patron, now he is being seduced

by the shramana, Gautama.” Feeling worried, he came and asked Shanxian what had happened. Shanxian told him the prophecies that the Buddha had made about his child. The Jain was skilled at fortune-telling and after carefully making his own calculations, came to the conclusion that the Buddha’s prophecies had all been correct.

The Jain was afraid, however, that if he agreed with the Buddha, Shanxian would have more respect for the Buddha than for him. Therefore he said, “Of Gautama’s prophecies, some were correct but others were wrong. It’s true that your child will be a boy. However, instead of bringing glory and prosperity to your family, he will actually bring you great misfortune. After he is born, your household will be destroyed by fire.”

Upon hearing this, Shanxian decided to terminate his wife’s pregnancy. At first he tried to administer pills to his wife, but this didn’t work because the child had accumulated the karma to attain arhathood in this lifetime; it was to be his last rebirth. Shanxian then tried, over a period of several months, to give his wife a special type of massage, but this also had no effect. As a last resort, he decided to take his wife’s life and kill the baby and mother at the same time. Having done this, he felt a great sense of relief, since he believed the child could no longer bring ruin and misfortune upon him. He pretended that his wife had died of natural causes and,

together with his relatives, carried her corpse to a charnel ground to be cremated.

On hearing of her death, the Jains were delighted, since they thought this would be an excellent opportunity to discredit the Buddha and disprove his predictions. Throughout the city, they proclaimed loudly that the Buddha's prophecies about the child, such as it bringing prosperity to the family, becoming a monastic, following the Buddha's teaching, and attaining arhathood, couldn't possibly be true since the mother had died before giving birth.

2 Birth in the Charnel Ground

At the time of her cremation, Buddha Shakyamuni came to the charnel ground accompanied by a large retinue of many types of beings. King Bimbisara also came, along with his retinue, to watch what would happen. The corpse of Shanxian's wife was placed on the firewood and set on fire. Under the fierce heat, all her limbs burned away, but the area around her belly remained completely untouched. Suddenly, her stomach split open, and a blossoming blue lotus emerged upon which sat a small child, in a majestic pose. The crowd gasped in amazement. The Buddha then asked someone to take the child from the fire and place him in Shanxian's hands. Shanxian, however, refused to take the child because he still believed he would bring disaster and ruin upon

him. So the Buddha asked King Bimbisara if he would adopt him. King Bimbisara agreed, took the child in his hands, and asked the Buddha, "What name should he be given?" The Buddha then said, "Since he was born from fire, he can be called, Fire-Born."

Fire-Born then grew up under King Bimbisara's care. One day, Fire-Born's uncle (the brother of Fire-Born's mother), returned from a business trip that had taken him to faraway lands. On learning that his sister had died at the hands of Shanxian, and that her child had been adopted by King Bimbisara, he headed straight to Shanxian's home and demanded that he take back the child, otherwise he would gather all his relatives, publicly expose his wrong-doing and seek to have him punished. Greatly upset by these words, Shanxian went to see King Bimbisara and pleaded that he return the child to him. But the King said that he could only do this if he had the Buddha's permission. He told Shanxian to find the Buddha and make this request to him personally. Having successfully obtained the Buddha's permission, Shanxian took Fire-Born back to his home and raised him as his son.

3 Renouncing His Wealth and Seeking Ordination

Shanxian later passed away. As a result of his merit, Fire-Born became extremely wealthy. Ajatashatru, the son of King Bimbisara, was very jealous of Fire-Born and after seizing the throne from his

father, demanded a share of Fire-Born's wealth. Fire-Born thought, "Since Ajatashatru killed even his father, there's no way he will allow me to remain wealthy. I should agree to give him all my riches." So Fire-Born said, "O King, I intend to offer you my house and all my wealth, not just a share. Please come and live in my house. I will go to your palace and follow your orders."

However, when King Ajatashatru moved into Fire-Born's house, all the wealth deserted him and followed Fire-Born into the palace. Fire-Born and the King swapped places seven times but each time the wealth followed Fire-Born. Exasperated, the King decided to try another way—he asked a thief to go to Fire-Born's house and steal all the treasures. However when the thief tried to sneak into the house, he was caught by Fire-Born. Everyone then came to know that the thief had been sent by the King and was outraged by his deceitful behavior. Upon hearing this, King Ajatashatru sent one of his minions to tell Fire-Born to release the thief without harming him. Fire-Born immediately complied.

Fire-Born then thought, "Since the King was capable of killing even his father, he wouldn't think twice about ending my life. I shouldn't risk my life for the sake of my wealth. Since the Buddha had prophesied I would become a monk and attain arhathood, I should now abandon the worldly life and seek ordination." So he gave away all of his wealth to the poor and needy, presented himself

before the Buddha and requested ordination. After practicing diligently, he attained arhathood.

4 Why Was Angaja Born in Fire

At that time, the bhikkhus asked the Buddha, “What karma had Fire-Born accumulated that resulted in him being burned in a fire with his mother? What karma had he created that caused him to be born in a very wealthy family and to attain arhathood?” The Buddha then recounted the following story.

During the time of Vipashyin Buddha, there was an elder and a king who competed over making offerings to the Buddha. The king was unable to surpass the elder in his offerings and this made him very anxious. He turned to his ministers who advised him to ban the sale of firewood throughout the country so the elder would no longer be able to prepare delicious food to offer to Vipashyin Buddha. Thinking this might be the only way to defeat his competitor, the king gave the order accordingly. However, since the elder possessed great merit, he had a store of very expensive sandalwood in his house which he burned to prepare even more delicious food to offer to Vipashyin Buddha.

Seeing that the elder had sandalwood to burn, the king once again became very worried since he had no sandalwood in his palace. His ministers then informed him that since the elder had no heir,

upon his death, all his belongings would become property of the king. They suggested, therefore, that the king permit the sale of firewood so that the elder would use ordinary wood for cooking and not use up his valuable sandalwood. Then once the elder had died, the king could take possession of all the sandalwood. The king followed this advice and permitted the sale of firewood.

When he heard about the king's order, the elder became very angry and said, "With all the sandalwood I have in my house, I could burn both the king and his mother together!" He made this curse whilst he was making offerings to Vipashyin Buddha. Having made the offerings, however, he then made the following aspiration, "Through these offerings, in all my future lives may I be reborn in families with great wealth. May I obtain the sublime Dharma and be freed from destructive emotions."

That elder is now Fire-Born. Because of the terrible curse that he made about burning the king and his mother together, he experienced that same fate over the course of five hundred lifetimes. This life was the last of that cycle. At the same time, as a result of his offerings to Vipashyin Buddha and the aspirations that he made, he was born into a wealthy family in each of his lives and eventually attained arhathood by following my teachings.

This is the life story of the elder Angaja, Fire-Born. It is a strong example of the infallibility of the law of karma (cause and effect). Stories like this are always very thought-provoking. When we hear such accounts, for example from *The Hundred Deeds* and the *White Lotus: An Extensive Biography of the Lives of Buddha Shakyamuni*, we become very conscious of the way we speak and act. It makes us very aware not to accumulate negative karma. For this reason, there is great benefit in reading these stories.



Lecture Two

PURPOSE OF THE TEACHING

Praying for the Long Life of the Masters

Why am I teaching the *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders* this time? My foremost wish is that, after having learned about this practice, you will all pray regularly for the long life of the great masters in all ten directions. Sentient beings in this degenerate age are hardly able to see buddhas and bodhisattvas in person, but they can see suitably qualified teachers and great masters who are their manifestations. The true essence of the Dharma can only be propagated when great masters who are the holders of the teachings remain long in the world. So, for the Dharma to flourish and spread, it is very important that we supplicate all great teachers everywhere to remain long in the world. This is one of the main reasons why we are studying this prayer.

There are many great and noble masters in this world who possess the three higher trainings of discipline, meditation, and wisdom, and who are as precious as wish-fulfilling jewels. Frankly speaking, however, some Buddhists are quite narrow-minded. They care

greatly about their own teachers and pray for their long life, because they have a close connection to them, but they don't seem to care about other masters and never pray that they may also live long. That, I think, is a very limited view.

It's important to know that in countless different realms, there are countless great masters who truly benefit sentient beings. Even if their lives were to remain secure for just one additional day, this would bring inconceivable benefit to beings because of their virtues and powers. Therefore we should all pray with full sincerity that all the great masters may live long into the future.

1 Doubt Comes from a Lack of Understanding

Some of you might wonder, "Does praying like this actually work?" If you have such a thought, it shows a lack of proper Dharma study and understanding. Nowadays, people think all kinds of things about the Dharma. When we talk about the life stories of the Sixteen Arhats, they think these are just myths or legends, and when they hear about the inconceivable powers of the Three Jewels, their minds are filled with doubts. It's understandable in a way. Their normal life doesn't expose them to Dharma teaching, so they lack a proper understanding of the truths that Buddha taught.

It's like people who know nothing whatsoever about medical science—if an Asian doctor talks to them about the origin and

properties of a particular herb, you would expect them to have doubts. Speaking of this, the other day, I was at the Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine where many young people are majoring in traditional Tibetan medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, and Western medicine. Since traditional medicine has its roots in the remote past, it's often necessary to study these ancient historical origins in order to gain full mastery of the discipline.

Take Tibetan medicine as an example. When I was in junior high school, one of my relatives was a traditional Tibetan doctor who was an accomplished practitioner of Tibetan medicine, and he often told me stories about his field of expertise. He would always say that in order to study Tibetan medicine thoroughly, it was absolutely essential to learn about its supernormal origins, which can be traced back to the rishis who were emanated by the Medicine Buddha. Quite apart from its extraordinary origins, the history of Tibetan medicine is full of miraculous stories that I am sure people today would find difficult to believe.

Likewise, traditional Chinese medical texts such as the *Compendium of Materia Medica*, include many miraculous stories about herbs and the attributions of their properties. Unfortunately, because most professors and experts today have scant knowledge of these ancient histories, they tend to dismiss such accounts as mere superstition or legend, and fail to teach them at their schools. Their attitude,

however, is based on a lack of proper knowledge rather than on any sound reasoning and fact.

My point is, any doubts that we might have are almost surely to be the result of our lack of knowledge and understanding. When we learn about the Sixteen Arhats, therefore, we shouldn't just regard their life stories as being interesting tales; we should try to develop a proper, comprehensive understanding of their message. Otherwise, it would be like putting Master Xuanzang's, *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, in the same category as the novel, *Journey to the West*. The former is a historical text, while the latter is purely a work of fiction, albeit based on various folk tales and legends that originate from what Xuanzang wrote.

2 Developing a Correct Understanding of the Dharma

Continuing this theme, many people nowadays like to work on specialized subjects that they know little about. For example, some people have made films about Buddhism that are largely inaccurate, hence they attract a lot of criticism because the ideas they express are not consistent with authentic Buddhist teachings. Since Buddhism is a very profound and complex subject, its truth can only be fathomed through its own teachings and terminology. It's not necessary, and would be utterly futile, to try to adjust its teachings.

Of course, it's okay to change the words that we use when we express the Dharma. I've been told, for example, that my recently published books, *Tales for Transforming Adversity* and *Achieve by Doing*³ are very popular. This may be because I expressed Buddhist teachings, such as how to dispel destructive emotions, in a way that modern people can easily relate to and understand. The contents of these books, however, and all the stories they contain, are entirely consistent with the Buddhist teachings, albeit expressed in a slightly different way. I did not change anything.

So, when monastics or lay practitioners share Dharma teachings, it is important that they convey the teachings in a modern and easy-to-understand way. But this should not lead to an over-secularization of the content, since this would completely spoil the true meaning and flavor of the original teachings.

Some people today would probably find it difficult to listen to teachings on technical Dharma subjects, such as Buddhist logic and Madhyamaka philosophy. For someone who hasn't listened to any Buddhist teachings before, even these lectures I'm giving now on the Sixteen Arhats would probably be difficult to follow. I'm trying my best to make the teaching as appealing and accessible for you as possible, however, I hope you will understand that I cannot secularize it too much. Instead, it would be preferable for you

³ Find those books at <https://khenposodargye.org/books/publication/>

to accustom yourself to the traditional style of Dharma teaching, so that you can truly enter the profound depths of the ocean of Dharma. Only by doing so can you truly obtain the benefits.

Propagating the Dharma Is Our Collective Responsibility

1 Standing Up for the Truth When Necessary

Another reason why I wanted to teach this prayer, is to encourage you all to uphold and propagate the Dharma so that it may flourish all over the world. Upholding the Dharma is not only the job of great masters but the responsibility of every single Buddhist. I stress this because Buddhists today are facing a not very positive situation.

Generally speaking, people think religion is a serious matter and they don't make casual remarks about it. Mahayana Buddhism, however, seems to be an exception to the rule—everyone seems to feel free to criticize it. They misinterpret key concepts such as selflessness and compassion and have no sense that what they say might cause offense to Buddhists. Buddhists themselves, when faced with such criticism, appear to remain indifferent, as if they didn't hear what was being said. Some people, therefore, including the media, take advantage of this situation and trample on, denigrate, and criticize Buddhists at will. They make frequent,

open attacks on Buddhist ethics, Buddhist teachings, and so forth. They seize upon small incidents, such as the behavior of just one Buddhist practitioner, to make sweeping criticisms of Buddhism as a whole.

Last year, for example, several news outlets published stories criticizing a monk for drinking alcohol. It's very difficult to know, however, what the truth of the matter was. If this were another religious tradition, however, even if their followers were seen to behave improperly on numerous occasions, those news outlets would probably remain silent and overlook the matter, for fear of offending the followers of that religion and inviting repercussions.

Dharma practitioners seem to think that since Buddhism advocates selflessness and compassion, they should tolerate all kinds of criticism, even if it is entirely unwarranted and unjustified. But this is a mistaken interpretation of what compassion means. The Buddhist teachings on tolerance don't mean you should put up with absolutely everything, indiscriminately, for instance, remaining silent when people hurl abuse at you or make wrongful accusations.

Certainly, as Mahayana Buddhists, we do not advocate the use of violence or any kind of weapons in response to such attacks. Retaliation by illegal or inappropriate means is strictly forbidden, as Buddhism has never allowed any form of violence born out of

anger. Instead, we should try to establish the truth through debate and other justifiable ways of standing up for ourselves. This is our right and responsibility as Buddhists.

Actually, many Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Golden Light Sutra* and *The Just King*, contain not just spiritual instructions, but also guidance on how to conduct ourselves in worldly affairs. A great many Buddhists, however, fail to acquire this level of wisdom. I hope in the future, Buddhists won't just remain silent when faced with unjustified criticism. We need to stand up for the truth whenever necessary, using appropriate means. This is a very important point that I'd like you to keep in mind.

2 Dharma Is for All Humanity

The most important point when teaching the Dharma is to try to help people gain a proper understanding, correcting any superstitions that they might have through the right view. Most people are well-educated and have the capacity to understand the Dharma properly if they receive the right kind of systematic guidance. Unfortunately, many Buddhists today fail to recognize this—they seem to care only about their own practices and collecting money for their teachers. These negative habits are especially evident among Buddhists from the Han regions.

So teachers and students alike should be very careful not to perpetuate the image of Buddhism as being solely concerned with collecting funds, conducting formal rituals, and talking of bizarre and supernatural things. Buddhism has a far wider scope and can be applied to many spheres of life so as to benefit people. When we propagate the Dharma, we should focus on how we can truly be of benefit to people and reduce their suffering, for example through charitable activities and other ways of making a positive contribution to society.

I firmly believe, from the bottom of my heart, that the Dharma is for all humanity. It is not a dogma exclusive to Buddhists, nor the private property of a privileged group of people. The Dharma has no bounds or barriers in terms of ethnicity, nationality, or location. It is a supreme source of mental and spiritual support that all people and all beings can benefit and receive nourishment from.

Sadly, some people fail to understand this crucial point and restrict Buddhism to the limited scope of religion or a parochial philosophy. This narrow and shallow perspective results in only a small number of people having access to the truths of Buddhism. This would be a great loss to humanity.

Therefore, whether we are monastics or lay practitioners, having studied the Dharma, we should plan how to make the best use of

our short life and help people to truly benefit from the Dharma teachings. I have seen some very influential people who, after reading or learning about Buddhist teachings, share their own experiences and understanding with others around, thus inspiring thousands of people. Although, they don't claim to be Dharma teachers, wearing robes and saying that they are turning the Wheel of Dharma, what they have contributed to the propagation of the Buddhist teachings far surpasses many so-called Dharma teachers.

Nowadays, there are exceptional people who use a number of skillful means to share the truths of Buddhism with the people around them, thereby introducing them to the Dharma and alleviating the suffering in their lives. Their actions align with the ultimate intent of all the buddhas. The sole intention of the buddhas is to help beings break free from their suffering and achieve happiness. Unlike ordinary people, buddhas never seek their own happiness and welfare, such as to eat and sleep well, or to recover from a cold and stop coughing.

3 First Study the Dharma

In order to spread the Dharma and benefit others, it is necessary that you first study and understand the teachings yourselves. When studying the Dharma, it is important that you make good use of

every single minute. When you attend a Dharma teaching, you should listen attentively—don't have a light, casual attitude, as if you're listening to a story or watching a movie. Some people just bide their time and keep checking the clock, some listen with their eyes closed, and some chant mantras while holding a mala in their hands. None of these are correct ways to conduct yourself when listening to a Dharma teaching. It is important that you listen carefully, with full concentration. If even wise people need to concentrate in order to grasp the meaning, how can those of lesser faculties understand the profound Dharma in an absent-minded way?

Since many cultures have no history or tradition of Buddhist teaching, they seem to think that Dharma is easy to understand and no different from ordinary, secular fields of knowledge. This is not true. For the wisdom of Dharma to arise in us, we need to engage in our studies wholeheartedly. When we attend a Dharma lecture that lasts two hours, one hour or even just half an hour, it is important that we reflect on all the stories or teachings that we have heard, so that we will be able to retain them and share them with others later. Regardless of our age, we all need to train our wisdom and memory in this way.

It won't bring us much benefit if we simply attend lectures passively, regarding them as a duty. In our lay Buddhist study group, there

are some people who have no real interest in studying the teachings, they attend just so they will not be marked as absent in the register. A person with this kind of attitude is called “Dharma stubborn” in Buddhism or an “old oil stick” in colloquial Chinese. Once a dough stick has been fried in oil and becomes an “oil stick”, then after a few days, however much you might try to fry it again, it won’t soften, not in the slightest. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche compares practitioners who remain impervious to the Dharma to the leather of a butter-bag that cannot be softened by the butter itself. In that book, Patrul Rinpoche heavily satirizes those Dharma-stubborn practitioners. So please do not listen to the teachings with that kind of attitude.



Elder Ajita

AJITA

THE SECOND ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Ajita,
Who dwells in the crystal forest on Sage Mountain,
Surrounded by a hundred arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The Tibetan name for Ajita is “Ma Phampa”, which means “undefeatable”, thereby suggesting that this noble arhat is undefeatable. Ajita has an entourage of one hundred arhats and resides in the Crystal Forest on Hermit-Sage Mountain. His two hands rest in the mudra of equanimity. According to the *Nandimitravadana*, Ajita dwells on the Gridhrakuta Mountain, more commonly known as Vulture Peak, together with a retinue of 1,500 arhats. We pay homage to the noble elder Ajita to grant his blessings, so that the teachers may remain long in the world and the Dharma may flourish everywhere.

As we can see, there are different accounts as to the size of Ajita’s entourage. We should not regard this as contradictory. A teacher might be surrounded by 500 followers at one time and 1,500 followers at another time. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was teaching *The Great Perfection of Peaceful Manjushri*, there were about one thousand people present. In a Sukhavati Dharma Assembly that he hosted, there were tens of thousands of people who attended. All of this is recorded in His Holiness’ biography. So it’s perfectly understandable that the number of Ajita’s retinue should vary according to different sources.

Furthermore, we also see variance in the descriptions of the hand gestures that Ajita makes. As I said in the previous lecture, buddhas and bodhisattvas can appear differently to different beings. For

example, different great masters have seen Manjushri in different forms—some see him in the form of Black Manjushri, others see him in the form of White Manjushri; some see him with one face and two arms, others with one face and four arms; and so on. In the past, great masters from the Han regions actually saw some of the Sixteen Arhats in person. The arhats appeared to them exactly as they were later rendered in traditional Han culture paintings and sculptures. There are also records of Tibetan masters who have seen the arhats, but they appeared differently to them. In short, the noble beings seen by each master can differ in their form. Hence, it's not uncommon if there are different descriptions of their gestures, body colors and so on.

The One Who Owns an Elephant

Ajita was born into a wealthy family in the city of Shravasti. The family was already rich before having Ajita, and after he was born, they became even richer, such that their wealth far exceeded that of any other peer family.

When Ajita was born, his body bore many auspicious marks. Furthermore, due to his merit, an elephant appeared beside him bearing many treasures. Because of this auspicious sign, people called him, "The One Who Owns an Elephant". Around that time, King Pasenadi's wife gave birth to a beautiful princess whose

body bore auspicious marks resembling a monastic robe. Thus, the princess became known amongst people as, “The One Who Owns a Monastic Robe”.

As time went by, Ajita and the princess grew up. One day the two met in a forest and fell in love. Ajita wanted to marry the princess, but as a commoner, it was unthinkable that he should marry the daughter of a king, especially as in India at that time, the caste (class) system was deeply entrenched. Therefore, he set out to please King Pasenadi as best he could.

On one occasion, he offered the king two valuable tusks from his wealth-bestowing elephant. The king was very pleased and asked Ajita what he wanted to receive in return, but Ajita said that he needed nothing. It was extremely rare that someone should decline a reward from the king, so the king was impressed by Ajita, who seemed to him to be a good-looking and solemn young man.

Later, Ajita presented the king with more elephant tusks whose value could not be compared with any other treasure in the world. The king became even more fond of this young man and said to him, “I cannot always receive your gifts without giving you anything in return. Tell me what you want, and I will try to satisfy you.” Ajita replied, with respectful humility, “I desire neither wealth nor power. I only have one wish—that you give your consent that I

might marry the princess." Upon hearing this, King Pasenadi fell silent, not knowing how to reply. After a while, the king said to him, "I will reply to you tomorrow morning."

After Ajita left, the king sought advice from his minister. "On the one hand, I should not refuse this excellent young man—he is handsome, endowed with merit, and has many praiseworthy qualities, and besides which, I have no wish to sever my friendship with him. Nonetheless, I don't want to give my daughter to him in marriage, since marriage between a member of the royalty and a commoner is wholly improper and would give rise to a great deal of gossip." The minister then had an idea and advised the king on what to do the next day.

The next morning, King Pasenadi summoned Ajita and told him that he could marry the princess on condition that he ride his elephant to the palace. This was thought to be an impossible task, as everyone believed Ajita's elephant was too wild and unruly to allow anyone to ride upon it. Ajita, however, immediately headed home and returned to the palace riding the elephant. The king was amazed and wanted to try to ride the elephant himself, but the elephant ran away, and would not let him anywhere near him. Witnessing this, the king was convinced of Ajita's merit and allowed him to marry the princess.

Later King Pasenadi, accompanied by Ajita and the princess, went to the residence of Buddha Shakyamuni at Jetavana. King Pasenadi asked the Buddha, “What positive karma did Ajita create that he now possesses such a precious elephant? What positive karma had he created that caused my daughter to become his wife?”

The Buddha told them, “During the time of Vipashyin Buddha, there was a boy and a girl. Once, when they were playing by a roadside with a wooden toy elephant, Vipashyin Buddha passed by. On seeing the Buddha, they were filled with reverence, so they offered the toy elephant to Vipashyin Buddha. The Buddha then blessed the boy so that in all his future lives he would receive riches from a wealth-bestowing elephant. Since the girl was greatly impressed by the magnificence of Vipashyin Buddha’s monastic robe and aspired to have one herself, the Buddha blessed her to possess such a robe in her future lives. Meanwhile, they both had the wish to marry each other in the future. For all those reasons, in this and many of their previous lives, they have been a loving couple and each possessed the auspicious marks that they bear now.”

Buddha Shakyamuni then instructed them in the Dharma and the couple attained the path of seeing. Later, Ajita took ordination. Through diligent practice, he eliminated all destructive emotions,

attained arhathood, and thus was completely liberated from samsara. Since then, he was revered by people as a venerable elder.

Praying to Ajita

What are the benefits of praying to Ajita? Praying to Ajita can dispel disasters, harm, and demonic hindrances, eliminate negative karma from past lives, and increase virtuous merit. Therefore, there is a tremendous power of blessing when praying to him.

We pray to Ajita, along with his arhat followers, as well as to all the innumerable arhats, to grant their blessings so that the teachers may remain long in the world and the Dharma may flourish everywhere. Indeed, each of these arhats has inconceivable miraculous powers. Miraculous stories about them can be found in a number of historical sources. During recent times, some modern Western scholars have reportedly seen arhats in India and elsewhere.

As Buddhists, we should learn about these main arhats, so that when we go to temples, we will know what prayers to make when standing before their statues. Many people in the Han regions, non-Buddhists and Buddhists alike, do strange things like attaching coins to the noses of the arhat statues, or scratching itches for them. This is quite inappropriate. When we see representations of the arhats in a temple, what we should do is remind ourselves that

they made great aspirations to remain in the world so as to protect the Buddhadharma. It is very important, therefore, that we pray to them for the continued flourishing of the Dharma.



Elder Vanavasin

VANAVASIN

THE THIRD ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Vanavasin,
Who dwells in a cave on Seven Leaf Mountain,
Surrounded by one thousand four hundred arhats,
And holds a fly whisk while making the threatening
gesture:

Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

In Tibetan, noble elder Vanavasin is known as “Nagnanepa”, which means “forest-dweller”. Surrounded by 1,400 arhats, he dwells in a cave on Seven Leaf Mountain. He makes a threatening gesture with one hand, while his other holds a fly whisk. We pray to the elder Vanavasin, who has attained the fruition of immortality, to grant his blessings so that all the great masters in the world may live long and the Dharma may flourish everywhere.

According to the *Nandimitravadana*, the mountain on which Vanavasin dwells is called the “Habitable Mountain”. Regarding the hand gesture of Vanavasin, Emperor Qianlong’s praise in Ding Guanpeng’s painting says that he raises his two fingers upwards. In the painting, Vanavasin is depicted with his right hand holding a phurba and his left hand making the threatening gesture (fist gripped with the index and the middle fingers raised).

If we pray to Vanavasin, through the power of this threatening gesture that he makes, all harm from humans, non-humans, gods, nagas, rakshasas and other beings, that might otherwise disturb our practice, will be removed. It is similar to the way that Padmasambhava subjugated all the demons and tirthikas through his threatening gesture. Meanwhile, the fly whisk that Vanavasin holds brings the cool breeze and rain of Dharma to countless sentient beings, liberating them from the burning heat of the destructive emotions.

Life Story of Vanavasin

Vanavasin was born into a wealthy Brahmin family. Ever since he was a little boy, he rejected the mundane life and looked upon his family's wealth as something temporary and insubstantial, like clouds in the sky. He understood that wealth is the source of innumerable afflictions. It brings many worries—you need to guard it, pay taxes to the king, and so on. So, the more wealth one accumulates, the more afflictions one has. Understanding this, Vanavasin relinquished all his wealth and set out for the Seven Leaf Mountain, where he remained in a cave within the forest of seven-leaved trees. There, through diligent practice, he attained the fourth level of dhyana.

At that time, Buddha Shakyamuni knew that it was time to guide Vanavasin to spiritual liberation and came to the forest on Seven Leaf Mountain. Upon seeing the Buddha, Vanavasin was filled with boundless reverence and faith, and requested to take refuge and follow his teachings. The Buddha smiled and said, "Come, bhikkhu!" and with that, Vanavasin became a bhikkhu. After receiving teachings from the Buddha, he practiced diligently and eventually attained arhathood.

Some records say that Vanavasin attained arhathood in front of Maudgalyayana. Once when Maudgalyayana taught his disciples the verse,

*Commit not a single unwholesome action,
Cultivate a wealth of virtue,
To tame this mind of ours,
This is the teaching of the Buddha.*

Vanavasin overheard the teaching and by contemplating on its meaning, attained arhathood.

Meeting the Noble One

Seven Leaf Mountain is located near Rajagriha, the ancient capital of the Maghada kingdom, and is close to Vulture Peak. The cave that Vanavasin dwells in is also known as the “Saptaparni Cave”. Saptaparni is a Sanskrit word that means “seven-leaved”, which is the name of a type of tree. According to some sources, the cave acquired this name because there is a seven-leaved tree near its entrance. This also happens to be the place where the First Buddhist Council for the compilation of the Buddha’s teachings was held after the Buddha’s parinirvana. Although the cave isn’t very large, according to historical accounts, 500 arhats gathered there for the First Buddhist Council.

Some of you might wonder, “How is it that I didn’t meet Vanavasin and his 1,400 followers when I went to India and visited the cave on Seven Leaf Mountain?” Actually, these arhats don’t abide in the form of a physical body like ours. We know this by studying the *Treasury of Abhidharma* and the Vinaya. In his autobiography, Dudjom Lingpa speaks about his experience of encountering an accomplished monk from ancient times at a mountain of Larung Gar, when he was seven years old. This is recorded in *A Clear Mirror: The Visionary Autobiography of a Tibetan Master*:

“ . . . I went to a mountain flank called Puktsa. Its surface was made of stone and earth mixed together, and when I dug into it with a pickaxe, I struck a small boulder. I pried at it repeatedly with a strong stick and succeeded in dislodging it, leaving a crevice in the mountain. Inside I saw a dense lattice of five-colored rainbow light that held an exquisite, fascinating five-colored sphere. A monk, handsome in face and form, sat within that sphere’s expanse. He wore saffron robes; his two hands displayed the gestures of teaching the doctrine and abiding in evenness. He sat in cross-legged posture. With a smiling face he said, ‘You’ve opened the door of my dwelling place. Why have you done that? I’ve stayed here for three thousand human years and haven’t encountered an ordinary person. You can only see me because of your previous [good] karma and aspirations. Even if you couldn’t

see me, merely by seeing this, my domicile, you will surely realize the meaning of profound emptiness. So be joyful!

Who am I? I am the unfixed basic space of phenomena.

All phenomena are the five aggregates.

The five aggregates are things that arise in interdependence.

View everything as emptiness.

He then disappeared. . . They (Dudjom Lingpa's father and a family friend) closed the mouth of the cave with a lot of rocks and earth, and we left."



Elder Kalika

KALIKA

THE FOURTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Kalika,
Who dwells on Copper Island in Jambudvipa,
Surrounded by one thousand one hundred arhats,
And holds golden earrings:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

This elder is called “Duden Chenpo” in Tibetan and “Kalika” in both Chinese and Sanskrit. He is surrounded by 1,100 arhats and dwells on the Copper Island in Jambudvipa. He holds golden earrings in both of his hands. Some people say that Copper Island is none other than modern-day Sri Lanka. We pray to Kalika, as well as his 1,100 arhat followers, to grant their blessings so that all the teachers may remain long in the world and the Dharma may flourish and spread.

The *Nandimitravadana* states that Kalika lives on a continent named, “Simhala”, together with 1,000 arhat followers. As for what Kalika holds in his hands, Emperor Qianlong’s praise says, “With the tip of his fingers of both hands, he rings a pair of golden bells.” This description seems to contradict the earlier verse, but if we take a close look at the way the arhat has been painted, we can see that what he is holding in his hands resembles both earrings and bells. These golden objects seem to be ornaments to be worn on the ears, which also make the tinkling sound of a bell.

The Story of Jasmine

In *The Hundred Deeds*, there is a story entitled, “The Story of Jasmine”, which talks about the life of this elder. At the time Buddha Shakyamuni was in Shravasti, there lived a householder who was

endowed with enormous wealth. The householder, however, had no child and was greatly troubled by this.

As an aside, it seems that people today, as well as in the past, cared a great deal about having children, as if all their hopes were placed on their offspring. Therefore parents get very distressed if their child chooses to follow a monastic life, even more so nowadays than before.

Back to the story, this householder made continuous offerings and prayers to the gods so that he might have a child. Finally, his wife became pregnant and the couple were overjoyed. At that time, Aniruddha, the foremost disciple of the Buddha in the development of divine eye, observed that it was time to tame the entire family of this householder through the Dharma teachings. Therefore, he went alone to the householder's home to collect alms. Seeing Aniruddha coming alone, the householder asked, "Noble one, why have you come alone with no attendant? Is there no one at all who can attend you?" Aniruddha said, "I don't have attendants. Can you help me find one?" The householder replied, "My wife is pregnant now. If she gives birth to a boy, I shall offer him to you as an attendant in the future." Aniruddha accepted his offer and left.

After nine or ten months, the householder's wife gave birth to a child, who was endowed with many auspicious marks. At the time of his birth, a rain of jasmine flowers fell all around the house, thus the boy was named, Jasmine. As time passed, Jasmine grew up and gained mastery over numerous fields of secular knowledge. Aniruddha saw that the time was then ripe for Jasmine to take ordination. He once again headed to the householder's home and politely asked that Jasmine now become his attendant. Jasmine was very happy and willing to do this; the householder kept his promise and let his son go.

Jasmine followed Venerable Aniruddha and received ordination and Dharma teachings from him. Soon afterwards, he attained arhathood. To repay the Buddha's kindness, he decided to liberate other beings, starting with his parents. He exhibited miraculous powers before them and taught the Dharma most suited to them. They took refuge and eventually attained the fruition of stream-enterer, the first of the four results of the Hinayana path.

The bhikkhus asked Buddha Shakyamuni, "What caused Jasmine to be born with such auspicious signs? And what caused him to attain arhathood?" The Buddha told the bhikkhus, "When the human lifespan was 20,000 years, Kashyapa Buddha appeared in the world. At that time, there was a householder whose son became a monastic practitioner. Being a monk, this man studied diligently

and gained mastery over the Tripitaka. Through his guidance, his parents led a life of faith and took refuge in the Three Jewels.

“One day, this monk thought to himself that it is not sufficient just to study the Dharma, it is also important to accumulate merit. Therefore, together with his parents, he made abundant offerings to the sangha and often offered garlands of jasmine flowers at different stupas. Then, he made the aspiration, ‘Through this merit, may I take rebirth in a wealthy family in all my future lives. Wherever I am born, may a rain of jasmine flowers fall upon that house. May I attain arhathood by following the teachings of the next buddha.’ Meanwhile, his parents made the aspiration to again become his parents and attain enlightenment in the future. That monk is now Jasmine who enjoys these results. And the monk’s parents became Jasmine’s parents who also attained enlightenment.”

The Importance of Aspirations

This story clearly teaches us the significance of making aspiration prayers. Aspiration is a very important practice. Of course, as practitioners, it would be best if we could attain a certain level of accomplishment in this life. But in case we are unable to do this, we can at least make aspirations to gain attainment in the future.

For example, if in this lifetime, we are unable to guide our parents toward liberation, despite having exhausted every possible means,

we can aspire to liberate them once we become enlightened in a future lifetime. If in this life we don't possess the ability to propagate the Dharma, we can aspire to propagate the Dharma in all our future lives. Each one of us can make these kinds of aspirations.

Tibetans seem to attach great importance to making aspirations and have made a habit of them. Yesterday, several elder Tibetans came to the shrine hall to visit me. While we were reciting *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, since they were completely illiterate, they just sat reverently with their palms pressed together. I don't think they were just pretending to pray; I think each one of them must have been making the sincere and magnanimous aspiration to attain buddhahood for the benefit of countless beings. This is because aspiration is the core of most Tibetans' Dharma practice. They genuinely aspire to benefit beings, without a thought for the eight worldly concerns. I wonder if all of you make such noble aspirations when you pray?

We need to train ourselves in making aspirations so that it becomes part of our daily practice. Honestly speaking, even though some of us have studied many teachings, including the Five Great Treatises, in terms of making aspirations, we are no better than those illiterate old Tibetans. While of course, it is important to study the teachings very well, it can result, for some people, in filling their

heads with even more discursive thoughts. They end up doubting the extraordinary deeds of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the existence of past and future lives. Meanwhile, they seem to be incapable of making sincere aspiration prayers when in the presence of sacred objects or while reciting *The King of Aspiration Prayers* with the sangha.

When making aspirations, you should sincerely vow to attain full enlightenment in order to benefit countless beings in all your future lives. There should be no selfish intention whatsoever. But many people don't make aspirations like this. They only care about their own happiness and eliminating their own destructive emotions. Sometimes I feel ashamed of myself in this regard, but perhaps most of you don't feel this way. Maybe you have been practicing for many years and feel quite good about yourselves. Yet, it would still be a shame if you failed to value the importance of making virtuous aspirations.

Aspiration is a prerequisite to achieving our goal. Whether we wish to take rebirth in Sukhavati or gain attainment through Dzogchen practice, we all need to make the corresponding aspiration first. Only in this way can our effort be directed towards our aim. Therefore, we need to make aspiration an integral part of our daily practice.

Applying Ourselves to Dharma Practice and Accumulating Merit

It is also important that we put every effort into our Dharma study and practice. The majority of practitioners today, monastics included, don't put enough effort into their Dharma practice. It's very difficult to eliminate our deep-rooted destructive emotions if we only practice a little for a few days, or just listen to a few Dharma teachings. Some people say, "I suffer so much with my afflictive emotions! I want to become a monastic!" But without diligent Dharma study and practice, ordination alone won't eliminate your afflictive emotions. To eliminate our afflictive emotions, we must be diligent and apply ourselves fully to our Dharma study and practice.

At the same time, we also need to accumulate merit. This was mentioned in the story of Jasmine. In his past life, Jasmine realized that he should not only engage in Dharma study, but also accumulate merit. Therefore, he made offerings of jasmine flowers and other substances to the Three Jewels. By virtue of his offerings and aspirations, he was born with wealth and merit in all his successive lives.

There are people today who suddenly become very wealthy as a result of their past positive karma. I've met some such people—they

used to be almost destitute ten years ago, living on the streets, leading a miserable life. Then suddenly, they became very wealthy and now enjoy a life full of every comfort and pleasure. Superficially, we could say that they made their fortunes by investing in real estate and other industries, and because of the economic reforms in China. But behind this, the main reason for their wealth is the merit that they accumulated in their past lives. When their positive karma is exhausted, however, their wealth will likely vanish, like the bursting of an economic bubble.

All prosperity, including reputation and wealth, comes from merit accumulated in past lives. This is the case for both monastics and lay persons alike. I am deeply convinced of this. But some people, whose minds are full of discursive thoughts, may doubt this. As I said yesterday, some people are always skeptical about such topics, whereas they readily accept and embrace all kinds of non-virtuous ideas and actions. We should feel compassion for them as this is surely a sign of their lack of merit.

In a nutshell, it is important that we apply ourselves to our Dharma study and practice as much as we can, and at the same time try to accumulate merit. We also need to receive the blessings of noble beings and therefore should pray to them so that, to put it in modern terms, our positive energy will continually increase, and our negative energy will reduce as much as possible. In this way,

both our own Dharma practice and our efforts to propagate the Dharma will be smooth and successful.

It would be a shame if, in these degenerate times, laypeople only busied themselves with worldly preoccupations, and if monks made little effort in their Dharma study and practice, and paid little attention to cultivating inner virtue through the three higher trainings—or worse still, started to behave improperly. In that sense, the monastics would be more pitiable than lay people, since at least lay people support themselves through their own abilities and work, while monastics live from the offerings they receive from other people.

In short, whether you are a monastic or layperson, you should focus on your inner growth and development. Do not take this lightly or think that you are already doing a great job. With that kind of mindset, it is unlikely that you will succeed in whatever you are doing.

At any rate, it is important that we pray to the elders regularly to grant their blessings so that the life of the teachers may be secure, and the Dharma teachings may truly spread throughout the entire world. In this way, sentient beings will certainly obtain happiness.



Lecture Three

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND AND BEING CONSCIENTIOUS

Today, we will continue our study of the prayer, *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*. So far, we have completed five verses and we will continue now with the life stories of the other arhats. As you listen to these stories, I'd like you to keep in mind the following points. Firstly, you need to remember that all Sixteen Arhats attained arhathood under the guidance of the Buddha. Secondly, after they had attained arhathood, and since they were all such important disciples of the Buddha, the Buddha requested them to remain in the world to preserve and protect the Dharma. To this end, they continually grant their blessings so that all great masters and practitioners who truly protect and maintain the Dharma will remain long in the world. This is the extraordinary quality that they have.

The Importance of an Open Attitude

Before beginning today's teaching, I'd like to stress a few more

points. Firstly, it's important that you all try to keep an open-minded attitude while you study this prayer. My approach will be to share stories of the arhats with you exactly as they are recorded in the sutras, which is a very traditional style of teaching. People who have faith in the Dharma will readily accept these stories, however, those who know nothing about Buddhism and the traditional accounts of its history may find them far-fetched and difficult to believe. The extraordinary, miraculous happenings you will hear in their stories may sound like imaginary tales or legends. This is understandable. It's similar to how people today find it difficult to understand or accept a specialized field of scientific knowledge that they have no knowledge about. Imagine a group of people who know absolutely nothing about physics—a group of herdsmen, for example. If a physicist were to lecture them about their research and findings in the field of quantum mechanics, they'd very quickly lose track of what he was talking about and wouldn't believe a word of it!

We should try, therefore, to keep an open mind.

It would be a mistake to reject these stories and say that they are untrue, or to dismiss them as imaginary tales, simply because we lack background information and a reasonable knowledge of the teachings. It would be foolish for us to deny something that we know very little about. Also, we need to be careful since the

negative consequences of making offhand, derogatory remarks about the Dharma are said to be very severe.

As well as giving traditional-style teachings that closely follow the Buddhist scriptures, I also try to present the Dharma in a more modern and accessible way, especially when I'm giving lectures outside the Academy, for example at universities. Modern-day people have busy minds—their heads are full of their own thoughts and ideas. They also suffer a great deal from their untamed emotions. This is especially the case with well-educated people, such as university students and professors. However, since most of them lead very busy lives, they have neither the time nor the interest to work with their afflictions by studying and practicing the Dharma in a serious way.

So when I give talks to such people, I try my best to align what I say with their actual condition. Taking into account their limited capacities and inclinations, I try to combine all the knowledge that I have accumulated over the past many years, with the priceless pith instructions that I received from my masters, as well as the teachings of the sutras and great masters, into something that they can relate to and benefit from. As much as possible, I try to use language that is simple and accessible to modern-day people, and to make my talks easy to understand.

Most people today, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, have received a good education. Even if they are not highly educated, they still have no problem in reading a book and understanding what it says. This is a very different situation to what we find in the Tibetan regions, where apart from the monastics and scholars, the majority of people are illiterate. Since they don't even have middle school literacy, it is very hard to explain Buddhist concepts to them, as I do, for example, in my university talks. Comparatively, most people outside of the Tibetan regions have good literacy levels. This being the case, the talks that I give at these universities can be very helpful to modern-day people who are less receptive to traditional-style Dharma teachings.

Dharma Study Requires Conscientiousness

Secondly, when you study the Dharma teachings, whether they be traditional or more modern presentations, it is not enough to merely scan through them or be satisfied with attending just a few lectures. You need to be conscientious and to value the precious opportunity that you have to study the Dharma. Over the years, I have met a great many people and have seen how much they struggle with their thoughts and afflictive emotions. The fact is, afflictive emotions can only be eliminated through the wisdom of the Dharma. But this is not an easy task, accomplished within a short time frame—it takes years of long-term engagement in Dharma study and practice.

Only by studying and practicing the Dharma over a long period of time can our afflictive emotions and deluded thoughts be gradually reduced and ultimately eradicated.

Please don't think that because Dharma teachings are somewhat commonplace and easily available nowadays, we can take them for granted. The truth is, the causes and conditions that are necessary for just a single Dharma teaching are far from easy to bring together. Conscious of this, I value every opportunity that I have to give a Dharma teaching. And when I present a lecture or talk, I do this to the best of my ability, and prepare fully beforehand. For example, in preparation for this teaching, I spent a lot of time reading through the related sutras in Tibetan and Chinese, such as *The Hundred Deeds*. I feel this effort is necessary since so many of you have given up your time to listen to this teaching, and time is precious. Time is synonymous with life. If I don't apply myself wholeheartedly to the teaching, and instead just roughly speak about the Sixteen Arhats and brush over the key topics, I would be doing you a disservice and failing to respect the time that you have made available to be here.

Given how seriously I take these teachings, if you don't pay attention, or worse still, if my teachings fall on deaf ears, then you will have failed in your responsibility as a student. I genuinely believe that attending even just a single Dharma teaching is a rare and

precious opportunity, one that is difficult to achieve. It's not easy for me to give a lecture either. If we both play our part and study together diligently, even though we might be ordinary beings, the merit this will generate is tremendous. The Buddha himself emphasized this point.



Elder Vajriputra

VAJRIPUTRA

THE FIFTH ELDER

We pay homage to the elder Vajriputra,
Who dwells in the land of Sri Lanka,
Surrounded by a thousand great arhats,
And holds a fly whisk while making the threatening
gesture:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Next, we pay homage to the elder called Vajriputra, or Dorje Mobu in Tibetan. Literally, Vajriputra means “Son of Vajri”. He dwells in the land of Sri Lanka surrounded by 1,000 great arhats. In the *Nandimitravadana*, Vajriputra is said to dwell in Po-la-na (Parnadvipa), together with his retinue of 1,100 arhats. He makes a threatening gesture with one hand and holds a fly whisk in the other. We pray to him to grant his blessings so that all the great masters will remain long in the world and the Dharma will continually prosper.

Each of the Sixteen Arhats has a different miraculous power and grants a different type of blessing when we pray to them. It’s similar to how ordinary people have different specialties or how the great bodhisattvas have their own unique fields of activity. The blessings of Manjushri, for example, increase our wisdom; the blessings of Avalokiteshvara enhance our compassion; and the blessings of Mahasthamaprapta strengthen the power of our aspiration to liberate all sentient beings. In the same way, each arhat has a different specialty as shown by their different hand gestures and the different symbols that they hold. Vajriputra makes a threatening gesture, similar to the one that Padmasambhava is sometimes shown to make. This gesture subjugates all maras and tirthikas and dispels all our destructive emotions. If we pray regularly to Vajriputra or other deities who make this gesture, then

all hindrances from maras, non-humans, and destructive emotions can be dispelled through the power of these noble beings.

To sum up, Vajriputra has numerous excellent virtuous qualities and great power of blessing. Unlike ordinary people who can become famous by studying for just a few years, noble beings attain fruition as a result of their continuous practice over many lifetimes. It is important, therefore, that we pray to Vajriputra so that all true teachers will remain long in the world and the Dharma will spread far and wide. By doing so, our wishes will definitely be fulfilled.

Strive to Promote This Prayer

I hope all of you will make an effort to spread the prayer of *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*. Its practice will definitely contribute to the long life of all the lineage holders and great masters, and to the flourishing of the Dharma. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this prayer is continuously recited during the annual summer retreat. I think it was around 1986, I was invited to a monastery in Barkam to give Dharma teachings during their summer retreat. I went there alone and didn't ask anyone from the monastery to come and pick me up. While I was waiting for a ride about halfway through the journey, I met a young novice monk who was also heading there. After waiting for a very long time, I

eventually found a driver who agreed to take me. The novice came later with his father. Upon his arrival at the monastery, the monk was very surprised to see that I was to be his retreat master.

As the principal Dharma teacher on the retreat, I took part in the collective recitation of prayers during the mornings, but not in the afternoons. During the afternoons, I would spend time reading and preparing for the teachings that I would later give upstairs. Each time they recited the *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*, there was one particularly melodious voice that stood out from the rest—it was the voice of the young novice monk that I had met on my journey. His voice was so enchanting, I would look down to the temple through the window in my room every time the prayer was recited. It's been over twenty years now since that time, but I still have a vivid memory of the special way he chanted. I wonder what's become of him now? Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have many beautiful chants and melodies, this prayer being one of them.

Among those of you here today, many will undoubtedly become great Dharma teachers in the future. When you have your own monastery, authority and influence, I hope you will encourage your monastic and lay disciples to recite the *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*, just as you are trying to spread the *Praises to the Twenty-One Taras*. Hopefully in the future, monasteries and

Dharma centers everywhere will recite this prayer on a regular basis, for example on the fifteenth or thirtieth day of the month. Reciting it even just once or twice would contribute to the long life of all the great masters and the prosperity of the Dharma. Lay practitioners can simply recite this prayer whenever they can, and especially when they attend Dharma gatherings.

Many students often say to their gurus, “Please Rinpoche, remain long in the world and always turn the Wheel of Dharma.” The surest way to supplicate a great master to live long in the world and always turn the Wheel of Dharma is to recite this prayer on a regular basis. So I hope that you will all put more effort now into promoting this prayer.

The Life Story of Vajriputra

1 Prince Sarana

The life story of Vajriputra is recounted in several sutras. The one that I will refer to today appears in *The Hundred Deeds* and is called “The Story of Sarana”. During the time that the Buddha was in Rajagriha, King Pradyota and King Udayana would often wage war against each other, much like Japan and China used to in the past. Around that time, Venerable Katyayanaputra attained arhathood after having eliminated all his destructive emotions. He then started to travel to different places to teach people the

Dharma, in order to repay the Buddha's kindness. He first traveled to Ujjayini where King Pradyota reigned, and encouraged the king to take the refuge vow. Later, he visited Vatsa where King Udayana ruled, and this king also took refuge with him. Thus, he became the teacher of both kings.

One day, King Udayana's queen gave birth to a beautiful son who was given the name, Sarana. When Sarana grew up, he gained mastery over all fields of worldly knowledge. Soon afterwards, he developed faith in the Dharma and took refuge with Katyayana-putra. As time passed by, Sarana observed that his father, in his capacity as the king, was led to commit many unvirtuous actions, in addition to the good deeds that he occasionally tried to do, such as making offerings and giving money to the needy. But many times he would commit very negative actions, like fighting wars. This made Sarana reluctant to become a king in the future. He thought, "When my father passes away, I will be next in line to the throne. Once I become king, if I act like my father, I will also commit many negative acts, alongside some occasional virtuous ones. It would be better for me to become a monk and follow the Buddha's teachings so that I can eliminate all my destructive emotions and suffering." Having resolved to abandon worldly life, he requested his parents' permission to become a monk.

With his parents' consent, Sarana received ordination from Katyayanaputra and studied the Dharma under his guidance. Sarana followed Katyayanaputra and later traveled with him to the city ruled by King Pradyota. One morning, Sarana went into the city to beg for alms. Since he was new to the city and wasn't familiar with the streets, he arrived by chance at King Pradyota's palace and entered it without being noticed by the guards at the gate. Perhaps the guards had fallen asleep during their shift, much like people do today, or were absent at the time.

Having entered the palace, Sarana met the king's consorts who were overjoyed to see him, finding him to be a handsome and noble-looking young man. They prepared a seat for him, gathered around, and requested that he teach them the Dharma. With every good intention, Sarana then instructed them in the Dharma. While Sarana was teaching, King Pradyota came to see his consorts, but they didn't stand up to greet him, as would be their usual custom. The king wondered, "Why do my consorts not receive me properly? They used to be so respectful towards me. What's made them like this?"

As the king came closer, he saw that a handsome young monk was sitting in the middle of his consorts, instructing them in the Dharma. The king became furious and thought, "This would be okay if he were an enlightened being, but if he's not, he will still be

influenced by his desire.” So he set about asking Sarana a series of questions, one by one—namely whether he had attained the result of an arhat, a non-returner, all the way down to the first dhyana level. Sarana replied “no” to all the questions. The king thought to himself, “How dare he come to my palace and give teachings to my consorts if he hasn’t attained any result whatsoever?” He then took out a long whip and lashed Sarana so violently that he almost fainted. It’s a good thing today that in most places, law enforcement agencies make investigations first before handing out any punishment. Otherwise, if a person is beaten straight after being arrested, without any proper investigation, as happened to Sarana, the karmic consequences for the officials would be very severe.

Back to the story, Sarana became extremely angry at the cruel treatment that he received from the king. When he returned to the place of Katyayanaputra, he said to his teacher, “I was severely beaten by that cruel King Pradyota for no reason at all. I just happened to enter his palace by accident and his consorts requested me to give them some teachings, so this is what I did. My intention was utterly pure but that cruel king viciously beat me when he found out. I would like to request your permission to give up my vows. I want to go back to my parents’ home and prepare the four divisions of my father’s army to take my revenge on the

king.” Katyayanaputra replied, “You must not fall under the sway of anger. Did not the Buddha say that his disciples should forsake the eight worldly concerns and practice patience?” Katyayanaputra tried repeatedly to dissuade Sarana, but to no avail.

Finally, Katyayanaputra told Sarana, “I can see that you really want to go, but since it’s almost dark now, it would not be safe for you to be on the road—there might be dangerous beasts lurking out there, like tigers, leopards, and bears. You’ve been through a lot today and wouldn’t want anything further bad to happen to you. Why not stay here for the night and leave the next morning?” Sarana agreed.

While Sarana was sleeping, Katyayanaputra blessed him so that he would have a portentous dream. In his dream, he gave up his precepts, returned to his father’s home, ascended the throne, and then led the four divisions of his army to wage war against King Pradyota. But he was defeated in battle, captured alive by King Pradyota’s army, and sent to be executed. As he was being brought to the place of execution, full of terror, he saw Katyayanaputra begging for alms in the city. He shouted, “Venerable one! Please save me!” In the midst of his cries, he awoke from the dream, still terrified.

Katyayanaputra reassured Sarana that what he had just experienced was merely a dream. Sarana felt relieved but started to think what a great crime he would have committed had he given vent to his anger, relinquished his precepts, and exacted revenge upon the king. Realizing his mistake, he said to Katyayanaputra, "I was wrong not to listen to you. I will neither give up my precepts nor take revenge on King Pradyota." Seeing that Sarana had developed true renunciation, Katyayanaputra began to guide him with Dharma teachings appropriate to his level. Because of this strong renunciation that he gave rise to, his anger was quelled, along with all his other afflictive emotions. Eventually, after diligent practice, he attained arhathood. Later, King Pradyota heard that the bhikkhu he had lashed was the son of King Udayana. Feeling enormous regret, he came before Sarana to beg his forgiveness.

2 King Brahmadata

When the bhikkhus heard what had happened to Sarana, they asked the Buddha, "Venerable teacher, what caused Sarana to be beaten like this? What caused him to become a monastic and attain arhathood?" The Buddha told the bhikkhus the following story. A very long time ago, King Brahmadata reigned in the city of Varanasi. One day, the king and his consorts went to the gardens where the king fell asleep. As he was sleeping, his consorts met a pratyekabuddha who was also taking rest there. The consorts were

delighted—they sat at his feet and requested that he teach them the Dharma. When the king awoke and saw what was happening, he thought that the monk was seducing his wives and became extremely angry. So he took out a whip and fiercely lashed the pratyekabuddha.

Out of compassion for the king who had been overwhelmed by his anger, the pratyekabuddha rose into the sky and displayed various miracles to him. Witnessing this, the king felt a great sense of remorse for what he had just done and repented sincerely. He made offerings to the pratyekabuddha for as long as he was alive, and then to his remains after he had entered nirvana. Each time he made those offerings, he made the aspiration, “May I not experience the retribution of having harmed such a pure being. May I meet a teacher even more exalted than him, cast away all my afflictive emotions through following his teaching, and attain arhathood.”

King Brahmadata was none other than Sarana, the elder Vajriputra. Although the king prayed not to experience the result of his violent act, nevertheless, when the karma had ripened, in all his later rebirths he experienced his own body being lashed. In this life, he was beaten by King Pradyota. Since the Buddha is more exalted than a pratyekabuddha, he took ordination under the Buddha’s teaching, cast away all afflictive emotions and attained arhathood.

3 Ananda's Attainment of Arhathood

According to the *Madhyama Agama*, it was Vajriputra who inspired Ananda to attain arhathood. It states in that text that on one occasion, after the Buddha had entered parinirvana, Ananda was giving Dharma teachings to a large group of people. The elder Vajriputra, who had already attained arhathood by then, was among the assembly—he wondered whether or not Ananda had also attained arhathood. Through his supernatural insight, Vajriputra could see that Ananda hadn't reached this level yet. Therefore, Vajriputra said to Ananda that whilst it was good he gave Dharma teachings to others, it would be preferable if he first attained realization by meditating in solitude. As soon as he received this instruction from Vajriputra, Ananda went to a solitary place to meditate and, through his diligent practice, later attained arhathood.

Reflections on Monasticism and Karma

As we can see from this story, when Sarana resolved to take ordination, his parents were very supportive of his decision. This is quite different from the situation in the Han regions today where some parents strongly resist their children from being ordained. A while ago, I received a phone call from the mother of a monastic student. She was crying nonstop and said to me, "I can't understand

why all the children of the people around me came back to their families during the New Year except my child? My life is over, there's no hope for me! What should I do? Why is fate being so unfair to me? I have always been a good person, but my child has ended up being a monastic. I can't accept it no matter what. Why do I have such misfortune in my life. . . ”

In Tibetan households, conversely, people are extremely happy if a member of their family takes ordination. They see it as a family honor and boast about it wherever they go. If, however, their child stops being a monk and gives up their vows to return to worldly life, they regard this as a disgrace and are too ashamed to speak about it. In the Han regions, it seems to be the opposite. Many parents are ashamed if their child takes ordination and make all sorts of demands on the child if they wish to visit them. They say, for example, “If you come back during the New Year, you must take off your robe and wear a wig, otherwise, I'll be too ashamed for our relatives to see you.” This is because of the misplaced notions they have about Buddhism, which is understandable to a certain extent.

Another lesson we can learn from Sarana's story is of the infallibility of the law of karma. Although Vajriputra had led an unblemished life and done nothing wrong, he was cruelly lashed by King Pradyota because of the negative actions he had committed in

his past life. In our own lives, if other people scold us, insult us, or seize our property for seemingly no reason, we will probably think this is totally unjustified. What we experience, however, is merely the result of negative actions that we have committed in our past lives. Buddhists who understand this will more readily accept the misfortune or mistreatment that they experience as the unavoidable consequence of the ripening of their past karma. Once, we received teachings on *The Hundred Deeds* from H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and for a certain period of time, we all seemed more ready to accept any harsh words, injustice, or harm that was directed towards us, since we knew that nothing happens for no reason. It's a pity that for most of us, except a few good practitioners, this understanding faded over time.

Sometimes when young people quarrel, they say, "I haven't done anything wrong to you, yet you still treat me like this. It must be because of what I did to you in my past life. I've got nothing more to say. I just have to accept the karmic debt I owe you!" They don't actually believe in karma at all, but they speak as if they do when they quarrel, since they have no other explanation for what is going on. Whether we believe it or not, the karmic law of cause and effect is the truth. Our belief doesn't change this fact one iota.



Elder Shribhadra

SHRIBHADRA

THE SIXTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Shribhadra,
Who dwells on an island in the Yamuna river,
Surrounded by one thousand two hundred arhats,
And makes the gestures of teaching the Dharma and
 equanimity:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Shribhadra is called “Zangpo” in Tibetan, which means “good” or “virtuous”. He dwells on an island in the Yamuna River surrounded by 1,200 arhats. With some arhats, it’s easy to locate where they live geographically, but for others it’s much more difficult. According to the *Nandimitravadana*, Shribhadra resides in Tamradvipa (Sri Lanka) with a retinue of 900 arhats. He makes the gesture of teaching the Dharma with one hand and the gesture of equanimity with the other. Through the power of his blessings, the life of all the lineage masters will remain secure and firm, and the Dharma teachings will flourish throughout the world for a very long time.

In the past, many great Tibetan masters would make the gesture of equanimity with the left hand and the gesture of teaching the Dharma with the right hand, before they began their teaching. The Buddha himself made such a gesture when he taught the Dharma at Sarnath and at other places. You will see many statues of the Buddha making this gesture if you go to Sarnath in India. The gesture of equanimity represents meditative concentration and helps the mind to settle, while the Dharma-teaching mudra represents wisdom and skillful means and helps to eliminate ignorance. Therefore, praying to Shribhadra or seeing his image will help to remove obstacles to our meditative concentration and to eliminate the root affliction of ignorance, thereby enabling us to obtain wisdom, compassion, samadhi, and so forth.

We pray to Shribhadra, as well as to all the noble beings who attained arhathood in the presence of Buddha Shakyamuni, since they possess inconceivable powers and virtuous qualities. While we may not be able to see them with our naked eyes, we should not doubt their existence and the power of their blessings. We cannot see microscopic particles or worldly ghosts and spirits either, but we can't deny their existence just because we can't see them. For such phenomena that are beyond our ordinary perception and comprehension, we first need to learn about them from reliable sources, such as the sutras and shastras, then gradually cultivate our understanding and faith in them. We will then be able to arouse true conviction, an irreversible faith in the Dharma teachings. Generally speaking, it is only through continuous study that our faith can be strengthened, wisdom increased, and compassion extended to all beings.

The Flourishing of the Dharma Depends on Everyone

All of us, whether we are a lay or ordained practitioner, need to play our part in helping the Dharma to flourish. This is a very important point and the responsibility of every single Buddhist. It's not okay if we just remain selfish and only think of our own personal practice. Even if we can only help one person through the Dharma, once a year, we should set our minds on doing this.

Today is the first day of the new lunar year. I read a news report which said that around 80,000 people went to the Yonghe Temple in Beijing to make offerings and say prayers today. Of course, it's wonderful for the temple that so many people visit in one day. In some ways, this is a sign that the Buddhadharmā is flourishing. But it would be better, and of far greater benefit, if those Buddhists really understood the Dharma properly, eliminated their suffering through its practice, and aspired to spread the Dharma for the benefit of others. If all Buddhists used every possible skillful means at their disposal to accomplish the "two-fold benefit" of self and others, it would have a tremendous impact and benefit. This is, therefore, our common responsibility.

Lay people, in particular, should not underrate their role in this regard. They shouldn't think that because they are lay practitioners, it is not their responsibility to propagate the Dharma. During a meeting of our lay volunteers last year, one of them said, "I used to think that propagating the Dharma was only the job of Dharma teachers and great masters, but now I realize that it is the responsibility of every single Buddhist." I've repeated what she said on many occasions since then, as most Buddhists today haven't realized this fact.

Why do I say this? Look at the way most Buddhists say their prayers. During the holidays, in both the Han and Tibetan regions, the

monasteries are full of people making offerings and saying prayers. But almost everyone who goes to a monastery does so to pray for their own protection, wealth, success, well-being, and happiness, in the coming year. Their wishes are mainly focused on themselves, their children, and their family members, at most extending to the health and wellbeing of their friends. Other people seem to be beyond their concern. Buddhist teachings are extremely vast and all-inclusive, but to be honest, the mentality of most Buddhists is not in line with the teachings.

My point is, it is the responsibility of every single Dharma practitioner to help people understand the true meaning of the Dharma. Unfortunately, many Buddhists seem to lack the confidence to do this. A while ago, I came across a book about a well-known Christian. He was born without arms and legs, but still managed to travel all over the world to give talks and to inspire people. Many Christians believed that his devout faith and courage must have been a gift from God. He also thinks that he is divinely blessed. In contrast, many Buddhists, even if they have all four limbs intact, shy away from helping others, saying that they are not able to teach the Dharma and that in any case, this is the job of great Dharma teachers. When it comes to talking about other people's faults, however, they are not so shy to speak out! This is not the right attitude.

The truth is, there are a great many people in the world today who are interested in spirituality, and this has led to a huge growth in the spiritual market. Other religions have recognized this fact. There have even been arguments between countries about their certain market being targeted by another country. I don't know whether this is true or not, but it is definitely the case that some religions have capitalized on people's interest in spirituality to promote their own religion. If Buddhists do not propagate the Dharma now, it may become too late in the future.

As much as our personal practice is important, we should also try to inspire other people with the Dharma. Since today is the first day of the new year, it would be a good moment for all of us to make a resolution to benefit other people in the upcoming year. You could say to yourself, for example, "This year, I shall guide at least one person onto the path of Dharma. Although I can't make that person become an arhat, at least I can encourage them to take refuge and study the Dharma." If this is beyond your capacity, you could still resolve, "I shall try to inspire one person to read a good book about Buddhism. That way, even if that person hasn't taken refuge, he or she will at least gain a new understanding of Buddhism. This will be my responsibility for the year." If we all made such resolutions, it would really make a difference.

The Life Story of Shribhadra

Long ago, King Suddhodana, the father of Buddha Shakyamuni, had a charioteer who was about the same age as him. He was called Subhadra, which means “extremely good”. His duty was to drive the horse-drawn chariot that King Suddhodana rode in wherever he went. In modern terms, he would be the equivalent of a chauffeur. In ancient times, driving a chariot was a skilled job—if the charioteer was not skilled, the passengers would have a very uncomfortable time. Chariot-driving is also one of the “Six Arts” spoken of in the Confucian education system. It is said to be much more difficult than driving a car—the steering is far more demanding and you need particularly good eyesight.

Returning to the story, it was always Subhadra’s wish that after he got married, he would have a child. His wife, however, couldn’t become pregnant. Subhadra prayed continuously to various worldly deities for this to happen, but to no avail. He felt devastated. One day, King Suddhodana’s wife gave birth to Prince Siddhartha and the soothsayers’ prophecies about the child were all very auspicious. When he heard this news, Subhadra became even more eager to have a son so that he could become the charioteer to the prince. But still, his wife failed to become pregnant.

Later, Prince Siddhartha abandoned worldly life and eventually attained buddhahood. When the Buddha returned to Kapilavastu to give teachings, the thought occurred to Subhadra, "If I die without a son to inherit my wealth, everything that I own will become property of the king. I should use it now, therefore, to make offerings to Buddha Shakyamuni and his disciples." So he made abundant offerings to the Buddha and his disciples. As he had great faith in the Buddha, he said, "Venerable Teacher, I have always wanted to have a son. If ever this were to happen, I would offer him to you as an attendant and let him serve you, Venerable Teacher, just as I have served King Suddhodana." Knowing that Subhadra would have a son who would grow up to become a noble elder, the Buddha replied, "If you do indeed have a child, you should remember to keep your promise." Subhadra then said, "Of course. I always wanted a son so that he would become your charioteer when you were the prince, but now, since you are the Buddha, I want a son so that he can serve you as an attendant."

After some time, Subhadra's wife finally became pregnant and after nine or ten months gave birth to a beautiful, noble-looking boy. The father Subhadra was overjoyed and named his son Bhardra, which derives from part of his own name, Subhadra. Bhardra was to become the arhat that we know today as Shribhadra. Over time, the child grew up. One day, the Buddha saw that the time had come

for the young man to abandon worldly life, so he went to remind Subhadra of his promise. Subhadra remembered his pledge and without hesitation gladly presented the child to the Buddha.

The Buddha then took the young man to the vihara, ordained him, and instructed him in the Dharma. After receiving many teachings from the Buddha, he practiced diligently and attained arhathood within a very short time. To repay the kindness of the Buddha, Bhadra gave teachings to his parents, who attained the result of stream-enterer. The parents decided to give away all their wealth and take ordination just like their son. Through diligent practice, they also attained arhathood.

When asked how it was that all three of them had attained arhathood, the Buddha said it was by the power of their aspirations. When the human lifespan was 40,000 years, Kakusandha Buddha appeared in the world. After Kakusandha Buddha passed into parinirvana, the king put a minister in charge of building a reliquary stupa for his relics. The minister had no faith and asked his son to supervise the project on his behalf. In so doing, the son developed strong faith in Krakucchanda Buddha, and helped his parents to generate faith in him too. When the stupa was completed, the son made offerings in front of it and vowed to attain arhathood before a future buddha. His parents did likewise. By the power of their aspirations, all three of them attained arhathood in this

lifetime. The one who was the minister's son is now the elder Shribhadra, and the minister and his wife are now his parents.



Elder Kanakavatsa

KANAKAVATSA

THE SEVENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Kanakavatsa,
Who dwells in the supreme land of Kashmir,
Surrounded by five hundred great arhats,
And holds a jeweled chain:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The elder Kanakavatsa dwells in the land of Kashmir. He is surrounded by 500 arhats and holds a jeweled chain in his hands. The jeweled chain symbolizes the binding of one's destructive emotions, ignorance and self-grasping, so that wisdom can continually increase. We pray to him for the longevity of the teachers and the flourishing of the Dharma.

The Life Story of Kanakavatsa

The life story of the elder Kanakavatsa is recorded in *The Sutra of the Wise and Foolish*. According to the account that we find there, during the time that the Buddha was staying at Jetavana, an exceptionally handsome young boy was born into the family of an elder in Maghada. At the same time that he was born, a golden baby elephant appeared in the elder's treasury. To everyone's amazement, whenever the elephant relieved itself, it would only shed pure gold. Because the elephant appeared at the same time that the boy was born, the boy was called, "Protected by an Elephant".

Owing to the boy's merit, the golden elephant accompanied him wherever he went. As the boy grew up, the elephant grew alongside him. Once, the boy was playing with the sons of some other wealthy elders, and they began to boast of all the wonderful things that they possessed at home. One boy said, "The beds and seats in my home

are all made of the seven treasures." Another said, "My house and garden are made of the seven treasures." Yet another said, "The treasury in my house is always full of the seven treasures." When it came to his turn, the boy talked about his elephant. He said, "I have a golden elephant at home that was born at the same time as me, and when he goes to the toilet, he only sheds pure gold." Among the children was the son of King Bimbisara, Ajatashatru. When he heard this, Ajatashatru coveted the elephant for himself and thought, "When I become the king, I will take that elephant away from him."

Later, when Ajatashatru ascended the throne, he summoned the boy to come to the palace accompanied by his elephant. The father of Protected by an Elephant told him, "King Ajatashatru killed his own father, he won't hesitate to kill you or anyone else if he wants to. He must be summoning you to the palace because he wants your elephant." The boy replied, "No one is able to take my elephant away from me," and rode to the palace as requested. There he was greeted by King Ajatashatru with food and drink. When he was about to leave, the king told him to leave the elephant behind in the palace. Protected by an Elephant agreed and left on foot without the elephant. Soon afterwards, however, the elephant vanished into the ground and reappeared beside him, outside the

palace grounds. So Protected by an Elephant rode the elephant back to his home.

Later, he reflected, “King Ajatashatru does not follow the Dharma. He will surely harm me if he wants to take my elephant. Since the Buddha is now living amongst us, benefitting many beings, I should abandon the worldly life and become a monastic under his guidance.” With the consent of his parents, he rode his elephant to Jetavana and begged the Buddha for ordination. As the Buddha said, “Come, bhikkhu”, his hair and beard instantly fell away and he became a monk. After hearing the Buddha’s teaching on the Four Noble Truths, he attained arhathood.

There was a problem, however. Since the golden elephant still followed him wherever he went, the other bhikkhus found it impossible to meditate in the woods. As long as Protected by an Elephant stayed in the sangha, the elephant stayed with them too, and wherever the elephant went, people from the city would come to stare and marvel at it. So the bhikkhus complained to the Buddha about the disturbance that the elephant was causing.

The Buddha then told Protected by an Elephant, “Since this elephant is creating problems for the sangha, you must ask it to leave you now.” Protected by an Elephant said, “I have tried to but no matter what I do, it won’t leave me.” The Buddha then instructed

him to say the following sentence to the elephant three times: “I have now put an end to the cycle of birth and death and no longer have need of you.” As he repeated those words to the elephant, at the end of the third repetition, the elephant disappeared into the ground.

When the other monks witnessed this, they asked the Buddha, “What positive karma did Protected by an Elephant create in his past lives to bear such fruit?” The Buddha told them about his past life, during the age when the human lifespan was 20,000 years. At that time, Kassapa Buddha appeared in the world. After Kassapa Buddha passed into parinirvana, many stupas were built for his relics. Within one of those stupas, an image had been placed of the elephant that had been Kassapa Buddha’s ride, and this statue had become slightly damaged over time.

One day, a man was circumambulating the stupa and noticed that the image of the elephant had become damaged, so he repaired it with clay and painted it with gold. He then dedicated the merit, saying, “In all my future lives, may I be reborn into a high caste family and possess limitless wealth.” As a result, in all his future lives, he was born into a high caste family and was accompanied by a golden elephant. Because of his sincere faith in the Three Jewels, he met with the Buddha and received teachings from him, and was able to eradicate his emotional obscurations and attain

arhathood. This is the story of Protected by an Elephant, who is the elder Kanakavatsa.

As we can see from this story, it is very important to accumulate merit. Even though it might be difficult for us to find a realized being that we can make offerings to, like a buddha or an arhat, we can always make offerings to a stupa or statue of the Buddha. If we see a small broken stupa, repair it, and then dedicate the merit, we will definitely obtain virtuous results in the future.

In both China and Western countries today, there are people who become rich almost overnight. Whenever I hear such people talk about how they used to be poor but suddenly became rich, my conviction in the law of karma—just as it is taught in the sutras—deepens. Through the merit accumulated in past lives, people who were previously destitute can suddenly become extremely wealthy. There's great significance and benefit, therefore, in our accumulating merit whenever we see a stupa or statue of the Buddha. This karma will ripen into great results in the future.

Protected by an Elephant

Speaking of this story, reminds me of another bhikkhu who is mentioned in the Chinese Tripitaka, namely in the *Samyukta Agama*. This is the story of a bhikkhu called Nagapala, whose name also means "Protected by an Elephant". When he was studying with the

Buddha, Nagapala appeared at first to be quite slow-witted. One evening, as a light rain was falling, the Buddha went out to practice walking meditation. Indra, the king of gods, followed behind him, sheltering the Buddha through his miraculous power. Nagapala, who was then the Buddha's attendant, also accompanied them. They walked for a long time, and even though it continued to drizzle, the Buddha didn't appear to want to rest any time soon.

Back then, there was a tradition in Magadha that if a child didn't stop crying at night, the parents would put them to bed and warn them, "Makula is coming". Makula was the name of a local ghost. To this day, people in the Han and Tibetan regions still say things like, "Don't go out at night, a ghost is out there." When I was little, I was very scared of a chubby, short-haired lady named Tsadrol. So whenever I wanted to go outside, my parents would stop me by saying, "Don't go outside, or Tsadrol will come and get you!" That actually worked every time. She is still alive. I came across her last year in my hometown and told her how much I used to be afraid of her when I was young. Of course that's not the case now!

Back to the story. Thinking that, since he was the Buddha's attendant, it would not be appropriate for him to rest before the Buddha had finished his walking meditation, Nagapala came up with the idea of trying to scare the Buddha by saying that Makula was coming. This, he thought, would cause the Buddha to take shelter

and rest. He disguised himself as a monster and waited on the path where the Buddha was due to pass, and then leapt out and yelled, “Makula the ghost is coming!” Indra was extremely irritated when he saw this and said, “What kind of fool is it that tries to intimidate the Buddha? As the one who possesses perfect wisdom and merit, how could the Buddha be afraid of a ghost?” The Buddha replied, “There’s no need to be angry. Although Nagapala seems to be quite slow-witted now, through the insight and skillful means of the Dharma, he will gradually enter the right path of practice and eventually attain immaculate fruition.”

Although Nagapala was indeed slow-witted to begin with, he eventually reached arhathood by practicing the Dharma. I have seen this quite often—people can appear to be dull when they first enter the Dharma (even they themselves feel embarrassed when they think back to how they used to speak and think), but nonetheless, by remaining diligent in their study and practice, their wisdom gradually increases and they become very good practitioners.

Kanakavatsa and Master Wu Da

In Han Buddhist texts, we find reference to an encounter between Master Wu Da and Kanakavatsa. Master Wu Da was an eminent monk who was the National Master during the reign of Emperor

Yizong of Tang. When Master Wu Da was young, he met a monk in a monastery who was severely ill. While others were afraid of going near him, Master Wu Da tried everything that he could to take care of the sick monk. After the monk recovered, he said, "I'm very grateful for your kindness and care. If you ever need help in the future, please come to Jiulong Mountain (a mountain in Pengzhou, Sichuan Province). You will find me there, near two giant pine trees." After he had spoken these words, the monk left.

Later, Master Wu Da continued to practice the Dharma diligently and gradually became well-known throughout the country. Once, when Master Wu Da was teaching in the capital city, Emperor Yizong attended the lecture and presented him with a precious sandalwood Dharma seat. When he saw the seat, in that moment he felt a sense of pride and thought to himself, "Now I truly am an eminent monk. Even the emperor venerates me." Because of that moment of arrogance, his merit was impaired. Soon afterwards, a tumor developed on his knee. What made the tumor particularly alarming was the fact that it took the shape of a human face with a mouth and eyes, and if it was fed with food, it would swallow it just like a living being.

Master Wu Da saw many doctors but none of them could cure the tumor. Later, he recalled what the sick monk at Mount Jiulong had

said to him and wondered if his offer of help related to the tumor that he had now developed. He went to the mountain and found the two pine trees. Between the trees, he saw a large monastery towering into the sky, and the monk standing there, waiting as if to receive him. After they greeted each other, Master Wu Da was invited to stay for the night, and he described his pain and ailment to the monk. The monk said, "Don't worry. You can wash it with the spring water tomorrow and you will be fine."

Early the next morning, when Master Wu Da went to wash the tumor as instructed by the monk, the tumor started to speak, "Wait! Listen to me first. You must know why I appeared on your knee. Since you are a very learned master, you must know the story of how Yuan Ang had Chao Cuo wrongly executed. Did you know that you were Yuan Ang and I was Chao Cuo in our former lives? Do you remember that it was because of you that I was put to death, that I was brutally cut in half at the waist? I was full of hatred for you and vowed revenge. But for the next ten lifetimes, you were a monk and upheld your vows purely, and because of your virtuous conduct, I had no chance to take my revenge on you. But this time, because of that moment of arrogance you succumbed to, your virtue was weakened, and I could take advantage. Now, through the blessings of Venerable Kanakavatsa, I no longer hold any grudge against you." When Master Wu Da then

washed the tumor with the water, the pain was so excruciating that he fainted. When he woke up, the tumor was gone, and so was the monastery.

The monk who helped Master Wu Da was none other than the elder Kanakavatsa, the venerable Protected by an Elephant. I might have mentioned their encounter to you before when I gave a teaching on purification practice once. As a result of their meeting, Master Wu Da wrote the *Liturgy of Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance*, in order to inspire others of the importance of making confession. The liturgy is very well-known in the Han regions.



Lecture Four

Let's continue with our study of this prayer. Many masters across India and the Tibetan and Han regions have actually seen the Sixteen Arhats. It is said that whenever a Dharma teaching takes place, the Sixteen Arhats will also be present by virtue of their miraculous powers. This is clearly stated in many of the stories related to the Sixteen Arhats.

So when counting the number of people attending a Dharma teaching, there is a tradition of adding sixteen to the total. For example, if there are fifty people present, we add the Sixteen Arhats so that the total becomes sixty-six. H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche would always remind us to add the Sixteen Arhats whenever we made a count of our sangha members.



Elder Kanakabharadvaja

KANAKABHARADVAJA

THE EIGHTH ELDER

We pay homage to Kanakabharadvaja,
Who dwells on the western continent of Godaniya,
Surrounded by seven hundred great arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The eighth arhat is called Kanakabharadvaja (Kanaka in short) or Serchen in Tibetan. Kanaka resides in the western continent of Godaniya, accompanied by 700 arhats. According to the *Nandimitravadana*, he dwells in the eastern continent of Purvavideha, surrounded by 600 arhats.

Kanaka's two hands rest in the gesture of equanimity. This gesture represents meditative concentration which helps our mind to be settled, thereby enabling us to gain mastery over the external world. We pray that by the blessing and power of the aspiration of Kanaka, all the great teachers will remain long in this world, and all the Sutrayana and Vajrayana teachings will spread far and wide and continue to prosper.

It is said that if we pray to Kanaka constantly, our wealth and riches will improve. Some people want to become rich straight away and request Dzambhala practice from whichever guru they happen to meet. They don't even bother to check whether or not that guru is actually a holder of Dzambhala practice. In any case, by praying to Kanaka, depending on the merit you have accumulated in your past lives, your wealth will almost certainly increase. If your past accumulation of merit is weak, however, despite the great power of Kanaka or whichever guru you may meet, your efforts to become rich will be in vain.

The Life Story of Kanakabharadvaja

There is a story in the *Sutra of the Wise and Foolish* about an exceptional young boy who was born into the family of a wealthy householder in Shravasti. When he was born, the boy's hands were clenched into tight fists and when they loosened, two gold coins were found to be resting in his palms. As soon as the parents took the gold coins away, two more would immediately appear. As a result, over time, the family's treasure house became full of gold coins. Therefore, people called this boy, "Golden Treasury".

As he grew up, the merit that he had accumulated in the past began to bear fruit, and he developed the wish to become a Buddhist monk. In India during those times, you would traditionally seek permission from your parents before taking ordination. The same custom used to exist in the Han regions during the Tang Dynasty. After he obtained his parents' consent, Golden Treasury became a novice monk and observed the precepts as best he could. When he reached the designated age, he received full ordination as a bhikkhu. At the ceremony, he prostrated to every monk who was present. Wherever his hands touched the ground, two gold coins would miraculously appear. Afterwards, by following the Buddha's teachings and practicing diligently, he attained arhathood.

One monk asked the Buddha, “What virtue had he accumulated that enabled him to enjoy such good fortune and to reach such spiritual attainment?” The Buddha then told a story, “During the time of Buddha Vipashyin, there was a wealthy merchant who made a grand offering to the sangha. A poor man who made his living by selling firewood, heard about this virtuous act and rejoiced. He had a strong wish to participate and from the bottom of his heart, he offered two gold coins—all the hard-earned money that he had saved from selling firewood—to the Buddha and the sangha. It was because of this whole-hearted, unstinting offering that he made, that he enjoyed such great merit. In each of his future lives, for the next ninety-one eons, gold coins appeared in his hands and he enjoyed a great abundance of property and jewels. This monk, Golden Treasury, was the poor man in that former time.”

The Maidservant Who Became a Princess

There is a similar story in the *Biography of Ashoka the Great*. Once, King Ashoka made a grand offering to the sangha at his palace. Seeing this, one of his maidservants thought, “Because the king accumulated merit in his past lives, he now enjoys abundant wealth and honor. And with the grand offering that he is making now, he will continue to enjoy even greater abundance in all his future lives. In my own case, however, I must have accumulated a great

deal of negative karma in the past, since I have sunk so low that I have absolutely nothing that I can offer. And because of this, I will become even poorer in my future lives.” She was very saddened by this thought.

Later, the poor maidservant found a coin while she was cleaning and, overjoyed, immediately offered it to the sangha. As she did this, she made sincere prayers of aspiration and dedication. Soon after, she passed away and took rebirth as the daughter of King Ashoka. In one of the palms of her hand there was a gold coin, and whenever it was taken away, one more would appear.

King Ashoka asked an arhat why gold coins always appeared in the palm of his daughter’s hands. The arhat said, “Your daughter was a maidservant in your palace in her previous life. Because she offered a coin to the sangha which she found while cleaning, she took rebirth as the princess and coins keep appearing in her hand.”

The Sangha: The Worthiest Object of Offering

As we see from these stories, even a small offering to the monastic sangha can generate tremendous merit. So we should never underestimate the impact of even the most humble offering. When we make offerings to the sangha, it is important that we do so

without any stinginess whatsoever since the sangha is said to be the worthiest recipient of offering.

In the Han regions, there are many well-off people who like to accumulate merit by making offerings to a particular monk or guru that they feel close to. It is worth mentioning here that making an offering to an individual will only generate great merit if they are a noble being. If instead, the recipient is an ordinary being, this would be more like an act of charity, rather than an act of offering. Consequently, the merit would not be so great.

Therefore, if we want to make offerings, it is best that we do so to the sangha as a whole. The simple reason for this is that within the sangha of a monastery, there is sure to be a certain number who are noble beings. Take Larung Gar for example—there are thousands of monastics there and it is impossible that there is not a single noble being among them. So, if you make offerings to the sangha, it is the surest way you can accumulate great merit; you will also never err or have cause for regret.

When I meet with some Chinese sponsors, I always advise them to make their offerings to the monastic sangha as a whole, rather than to one or two individuals. All too often I see cases where someone makes an offering to a particular guru, based on a personal preference, but later comes to regret it. If this is the case, the offering

won't necessarily bring any great reward. So while the merit of making an offering is incredible, the most deserving recipient of our offering is the monastic sangha.



Elder Bakula

BAKULA

THE NINTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Bakula,
Who dwells on the northern continent of Uttarakuru,
Surrounded by nine hundred great arhats,
And holds a mongoose with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The ninth elder is Bakula, who is sometimes also known as Vakkula. He was among the assembly of arhats that first received the *Amitabha Sutra* teachings from the Buddha. Bakula dwells on the northern continent of Uttarakuru, together with a retinue of 900 arhats that surround him. He holds a wealth-bestowing mongoose in his hands. The mongoose is a well-known symbol of wealth—you will often see the wealth deity, Dzambhala, also holding one in his hands. Hence Bakula is believed to bring an abundance of wealth and merit if we supplicate him. In many ways, he is considered to be an equivalent of Dzambhala. We pray to Bakula to grant his blessings so that the life of the teacher may be secure and the teachings may flourish and spread.

The Life Story of Bakula

1 One Who Wears Tree Bark

The Vinaya texts contain a clear account of how Bakula became a monk and attained arhathood. Around seventy years before Buddha Shakyamuni was born, Bakula took birth in a Brahmin family in the city of Shravasti. After his father passed away, he adopted the life of a mendicant and practiced asceticism on a mountain. He was diligent in his practice, wearing tree bark and feeding on wild fruits. Hence, he became known as “Bakula” which

is the name of a tree in Sanskrit. He is also often called, “One Who Wears Tree Bark”.

While Bakula was practicing on the mountain, a rich householder named Purna built a grand hall at the foot of the mountain and laid out offerings for Buddha Shakyamuni and his retinue. Since it was very far away from where they were staying, the Buddha and his retinue used their magical powers to fly to the hall to accept the offerings.

By this time, Bakula was over a hundred years old. He witnessed the spectacular arrival of Buddha and his retinue from the top of the mountain where he was meditating. As he saw them flying through the sky, a tremendous wave of devotion arose in him, together with a strong wish to take refuge in the Buddha. It would, however, have taken him a very long time to walk down from the mountain top to the hall. He thought that by the time he arrived, the ceremony would be over and he would miss his opportunity. So, summoning his deep faith in the Buddha and his teaching, Bakula leaped from the mountain-side without a second thought.

The Omniscient Buddha saw what was happening and, through his miraculous powers, caught Bakula and guided him to a safe landing. The Buddha then instructed Bakula with teachings that were appropriate to his level. Upon hearing those teachings, Bakula

gained the realization of a non-returner. In response to Bakula's request, the Buddha accepted him into the sangha. After taking ordination, Bakula practiced vigorously and attained arhathood within a short space of time.

Among all the disciples of the Buddha, Bakula is considered to be the foremost example of devotion. Not only did Bakula possess strong and genuine renunciation, his understanding of the Dharma was also exceptionally profound.

2 Beyond Illness and Harm

We also find mention of Bakula in *The History of the Transmission of the Dharma Treasury*. It states in this text that Bakula lived to be 160 years old. Unlike some of our Dharma friends here who often become unwell, either because of a bad mood or actual sickness, Bakula remained in perfect health throughout his long life. He never fell sick. What was the reason for this?

According to *The History of the Transmission of the Dharma Treasury*, in one of his previous lifetimes, Bakula was born as an extremely poor man. One day, he acquired some medicine and generously offered it to a monk who was suffering from a terrible headache. As a consequence of this act, in all his future lives for the next ninety-one eons, not only did he never fall ill, he also remained

perfectly safe and protected from any harm. In his last rebirth, he was reborn as Bakula.

By virtue of his past merit, in this life, whenever Bakula faced any risk or danger, he always remained safe and secure. Bakula's mother passed away when he was little. Later, his father re-married and he was brought up by his stepmother. This new stepmother, however, disliked him intensely; we could even say she hated him. Once, when she was making flatbread over a large pit of fire, little Bakula came up to her and wanted to take a piece. The stepmother became very irritated and threw him into the fire, burying him with coals. Later, his father looked everywhere for his son and called out his name repeatedly. Finally, he found Bakula buried in the pit of fire and pulled him out to safety. The boy was alive and completely unharmed.

On another occasion, the stepmother was cooking meat and the boy approached her and asked to eat a piece. She became very angry with him and threw him into the pot of boiling water. The father again searched for his son everywhere but couldn't find him. He called out Bakula's name until he heard a muffled sound coming from the pot. Thus he was able to save Bakula and once again he emerged totally unscathed.

Another time, the stepmother was crossing a river with Bakula following alongside her. He irritated her so much that she threw him into the water. A torrent caught hold of Bakula and whisked him away; later he was swallowed by a gigantic fish. A fisherman caught the fish and brought it to the market to sell his catch. Bakula's father happened to be there at the time and bought that very fish! When its stomach was slit open, Bakula crawled out and once again he emerged totally unharmed.

3 The Man with Two Families

In Sanskrit, the word Bakula or Vakkula can also mean, "Two Families". In the *Sutra of the Wise and Foolish*, there is a story of "The Man with Two Families" which presents another account of Bakula's life.

During the time of the Buddha, a wealthy young couple lived in Shravasti who were desperate to have a child. Finally, after a long wait, the wife became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. The whole family was overjoyed and held a special gathering by the bank of a river to celebrate. The guests passed the infant from one to the other to look at the child, however, one of them accidentally dropped the boy into the water. A fish then ate the child and was later caught by a fisherman. The fisherman found the infant alive inside the belly of the fish when he cut it open. He then offered the

boy to his wealthy employer who had been childless and praying for a son.

The boy's family heard about this incident and demanded to have their son back. And so a heated dispute began between the two households. The king was forced to intervene and commanded both households to share custody of the child. When the boy came of age, each household would be able to choose a wife for him, and the children of each wife would then belong to that respective family. In accordance with the king's command, the two families raised the boy together, and when the boy grew up, each family found a wife for him. Later, however, this young man became fed up with worldly life and requested permission to become a monk. The parents of both families gave their consent; he then took ordination and soon afterwards attained arhathood.

The bhikkhus later asked the Buddha what The Man with Two Families had done to survive in the belly of the fish and become an arhat in such a short space of time. The Buddha answered, "Long ago, Buddha Vipashyin was giving Dharma teachings to a large assembly. A householder came to the teaching and heard the Buddha explain the merit of generosity and observing the precepts. Having generated strong faith and devotion, he took refuge in the Three Jewels, offered a coin to the Buddha, and upheld the precept of not killing. By virtue of offering a coin to the Buddha, he was

reborn in a wealthy family in all his subsequent lifetimes. Because he kept the precept of not killing, he was never killed nor harmed in all his later lives. And through the merit of taking refuge, he finally attained arhathood by following the Buddha's teachings."

Everything Happens for a Reason

Although the stories of Bakula recorded in the *Sutra of the Wise and Foolish* and *The History of the Transmission of the Dharma Treasury* differ slightly, both clearly describe the infallible nature of the law of karma. By abstaining from killing or by offering medicine to the sangha, we can remain healthy and free from sickness in all our future lifetimes.

There are some people who have a strong immune system and never seem to get sick. This could be an indication that in their past lives, they performed many virtuous acts and perhaps offered medicine to the ordained sangha. On the other hand, some people have very poor health and are prone to illness—this may be a consequence of their not having performed many virtuous acts in their previous lives, or even worse, having inflicted physical harm or verbal abuse on others.

In a word, everything happens for a reason. There is no way that one suffers abuse or dies accidentally without any reason. One of the most profound teachings given by the Buddha concerning

the relative world is the law of cause and effect. Most Buddhists have a fairly good understanding of this principle. It would benefit non-Buddhists too if they understood this principle, since it reveals very much the way our world works. If we ignore this basic fact, we will end up blaming life for any misfortune that we experience and feel that our suffering is totally unjustified. Actually, everything that we experience is nothing other than the result of our own past actions.

Most people don't think about past and future lives—they are solely concerned with their present life. They can't figure out the reason why certain things might happen to them during the course of their life. When bad things happen, they complain, "I have been a kind person my whole life. How could this happen to me?" Sometimes even Buddhists say such things. This is a sign of our ignorance of the law of cause and effect. The fact is our life is not just about this present life, it is also connected to our past and future lives. We shouldn't deny their existence, in the same way that we cannot deny that yesterday and tomorrow exist. So even if we have been kind our entire life, this may not bear fruit in this present life, just as the reward for any good action that we performed today may not come this very same day.

Imagine that a student has been working very hard at school today. A couple of days ago, however, he stole a pen from one of his

fellow students. Today, the teacher found out about his theft and plans to punish him. If the student argues, "I've been behaving really well from morning until now and done all my assignments. Why do you punish me? It's totally unfair!", this won't work. The teacher will punish him not for his hard work today, but for the theft that he committed a few days ago. Similarly, even if we have been doing good things throughout our life, any bad things that might happen to us now are not a result of these actions, but the result of negativity that we have committed in our past lives.



Elder Rahula

RAHULA

THE TENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Rahula,
Who dwells in the land of Priyangu,
Surrounded by one thousand one hundred arhats,
And holds a jeweled crown:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Rahula was the biological son of the Buddha. Some scriptures say that Rahula received this name because he was born during the time of a lunar eclipse⁴. According to another source, Rahula means “fetter” in Sanskrit. He received this name because he remained in his mother’s womb for six years, which was a fetter for both himself and his mother.

Rahula resides in the land of Priyangu together with his entourage of 1,100 arhats. He holds a jeweled crown in his hands. It is said that once Rahula taught the Dharma to a celestial king and his retinue who attained liberation from the prison of samsara thereafter. As an expression of his gratitude, the celestial king offered a jeweled crown to Rahula, which then became his symbol. We pray to Rahula for the long life of the gurus and the prosperity of the Dharma.

The Life of Rahula

1 Rahula’s Birth

On the night that Siddhartha planned to leave the royal palace and abandon his worldly life, he realized that he would be leaving without having a recognized heir in place, and people might speculate that the reason he was fleeing was because he had been unable to conceive a son. Siddhartha also foresaw that if he had a

⁴ In ancient Indian mythology, the celestial monster Rahu (from which the name Rahula derives) was believed to swallow the sun or moon during the time of a solar or lunar eclipse.

son, he would play an important role in upholding the Dharma. Therefore, he spent time with Yashodhara that final night, in order that Rahula might be conceived. This account clearly appears in many different Buddhist texts. After Siddhartha left, he spent six years engaging in ascetic practice, before finally awakening to buddhahood at the Vajra Seat. On the very day that Siddhartha attained enlightenment, his son Rahula was born. Yashodhara carried Rahula in her womb, therefore, for a total of six years.

According to the *Sutra of the Collection of the Past Activities of the Buddha (Abhiniskramana Sutra)*, throughout the length of her pregnancy, Yashodhara's body showed no obvious signs of change. This is because during the six years that Siddhartha practiced extreme austerities, Yashodhara wished to emulate him and also led an ascetic life at the palace. Later, hearing that Siddhartha had regained his strength and attained enlightenment, Yashodhara began to eat nourishing food again and hence regained her vigor. This enabled her to give birth to Rahula.

It is recorded in the *Sutra of the Storehouse of Sundry Valuables* that when Rahula was born, people from the entire Shakya clan, both inside and outside the palace, including King Suddhodana, suspected that Yashodhara had committed adultery. Thinking of the disgrace and damage this would bring to the reputation of the clan, King Suddhodana asked the Shakyas to devise a way to

kill Yashodhara and the infant boy. After much discussion, they decided to throw them both into the fire.

To prove her innocence, Yashodhara declared, "If the child is indeed the descendant of the great bodhisattva, let the fire be extinguished and let it fail to burn us!" She then leaped into the fire clutching Rahula in her arms. To everyone's amazement, the fire immediately turned into a cool lake and Yashodhara appeared in its center, seated on a lotus flower, holding Rahula in her arms. Both of them were completely unharmed.

In the Vinaya texts, it is said that Yashodhara tried to prove her innocence by tying a large rock to Rahula and throwing him into a pond. She shouted, "If he is indeed the son of the great bodhisattva, let him float. If he is not, then let him drown." She then threw Rahula into the water. Both the child and the rock remained afloat. Through these miraculous happenings, Yashodhara was able to convince everyone that Rahula was indeed the son of the Buddha.

2 Why Had Rahula Stayed Six Years in His Mother's Womb?

Why did Rahula stay such a long time in his mother's womb? In the Vinaya texts we see the following explanation: Long ago, a guru and his disciple lived on a mountain and sustained themselves by eating the fruits and herbs that they found there. One day, they

went out to look for food. The disciple was the first to return and since he was very thirsty, he drank his guru's water. When the guru returned later and wanted to drink, he found that his water bottle was empty. The disciple immediately regretted what he had just done and apologized sincerely to the guru. For the guru, it was a small matter of no particular consequence, and so he readily forgave him. Nonetheless, the disciple insisted that he be punished. The guru, however, couldn't bring himself to punish him since he didn't think that he had done anything wrong.

The disciple decided therefore that he would request punishment from the king and headed for his palace. On his way there, he met the king who was out on a hunting trip. He told the king, "I drank my guru's water, please punish me according to the law." The king replied, "There are no laws that apply to such a case, therefore, I cannot pronounce you guilty and issue any punishment." Despite this, the disciple persisted in his demand. Since he was so insistent, the king became irritated and told him to stay where he was until he returned from his hunt.

The king went away for six days, forgetting all about him. The disciple remained in that spot for six days without moving. Six days later, after having been reminded by his ministers, the king then sent a messenger to inform the man that he can now go.

The king was none other than Rahula. Because of making this man stay in one place for six days in his former life, Rahula was to remain in his mother's womb for six years as a karmic consequence.

As for Yashodhara, she had her own negative karma from past lives that made her to carry Rahula in her womb for six years. It is recorded in the *Abhiniskramana Sutra* that once in the past, a mother and a daughter were carrying two pails of milk back to their home. The mother asked the daughter to carry the larger pail and kept hurrying her along, as she was afraid there might be danger on the road. The daughter was annoyed about this, so she played a trick on her mother. She told her mother that she wanted to go to the toilet and asked that she carry her pail while she was away. She left her mother to carry the milk for a distance of six kroshas—more than ten miles—before she caught up with her again. That daughter was Yashodhara and because of that karma, she carried Rahula in her womb for six years.

3 Joining the Sangha

How did Rahula become a monk? It is recorded in the Vinaya that after the Buddha attained enlightenment, he returned to King Suddhodana's palace in order to teach the Dharma. Yashodhara had a strong wish to re-unite with the Buddha at that time, so she sent Rahula to greet him and to quietly slip him a love potion. But

since he was the Awakened One, the Buddha saw through her trickery and didn't drink the potion. When the Buddha later left the palace, Rahula begged to follow him. Knowing that Rahula was in his last rebirth and would soon attain enlightenment, the Buddha agreed to take Rahula with him and accepted him into the sangha.

In another scripture, we hear a different account. According to this version, the Buddha sent Maudgalyayana to the royal palace to talk to Yashodhara and to request that she allow Rahula to join the sangha. Maudgalyayana tried to persuade Yashodhara as best he could, but she wouldn't listen to him. Then King Suddhodana sent the queen to talk to Yashodhara so that she could change her mind. Being deeply saddened, Yashodhara said to the queen, "There were eight kings who proposed to me, yet I turned them all down so that I could be with Prince Siddhartha. Yet not only did he abandon me, he now also wants to take away my dear son, Rahula." This is exactly how some people react today when their child or spouse wishes to become a monastic—they cannot bear the pain of family separation.

Knowing how Yashodhara would feel, the Buddha sent his manifestation to appear in the sky before her, and said, "Don't you remember the vow that you made to me in your past life? During

the time of Buddha Dipamkara, I was a man practicing the bodhisattva path. I bought five lotus flowers from you in order to offer them to Buddha Dipamkara.

“At that time, you requested that I agree to marry you in all my future lives. But I told you that since I was a bodhisattva who practices generosity, I would always give to others whatever they wish from me, throughout all my lifetimes. I said that I would agree to your proposal on condition that you understood this fact. You then vowed that in all your future lifetimes, you would allow me to give away whatever I wished, including yourself and your child, and that you would never regret this. So why now will you not let go of Rahula so that he can become a monk and pursue the noble path?”

Upon hearing these words, Yashodhara recalled the pledge that she had made and became reconciled. She apologized to Maudgalyayana and allowed him to take Rahula away. Rahula then joined the sangha and the Buddha entrusted him to Shariputra. Later, Yashodhara also took ordination and eventually attained realization.

4 Attaining Arhathood

The *Samyukta Agama* records how Rahula attained arhathood after he joined the sangha. Rahula went to see the Buddha and requested that he give him pith instructions that would enable him to attain

arhathood very quickly. He promised that he would meditate diligently after he received the instruction.

The Buddha observed that it was not yet the right time for him to receive such teachings. If he were to share the profound Dharma with Rahula at that time, it would be of no benefit to him. Therefore, the Buddha told Rahula to explain the five aggregates to people first. Rahula traveled to various places and propagated teachings on the five aggregates just as the Buddha had instructed.

After a while, he came back and begged the Buddha to give him the teaching. Observing that he was still not yet mature enough to receive this dharma, the Buddha asked him to give teachings on the twelve sense bases instead. Rahula returned after having done that and requested the pith instruction once more, but this time the Buddha asked him to spread teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination.

Rahula gave teachings on the twelve links and returned to ask the Buddha for the teachings, but still the time was not yet right. The Buddha then told Rahula to contemplate in solitude on all the teachings that he had given to others. Rahula obeyed and when he returned to the Buddha for a fifth time, the Buddha saw that the time was now right to share with him the teaching that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. By contemplating

on impermanence, Rahula attained arhathood. Impermanence is indeed a truly profound teaching.

After the Buddha passed into parinirvana, Rahula continued to uphold the Dharma teachings as requested by the Buddha. The Buddha also implored all the tathagatas of the ten directions to grant their blessings to Rahula, so that he would be able to uphold the Dharma in this world. This is why it is so important that we pray to the elder Rahula for the Dharma to prosper.

Sharing the Dharma with Others

1 Our Responsibility

For the Dharma to prosper in the world, it is important that every Buddhist—monastic and lay practitioner alike—sincerely resolves to propagate the Dharma as much as they can. Don't underrate yourself, thinking that you are incapable of spreading the Dharma because you are merely a lay practitioner, or that as an ordinary monk or nun, living a pure monastic life is enough. Everyone can be a lamp. Even if we are not yet capable of dispelling all the darkness of the world, we can illuminate ourselves and those around us. So, try to become a bright lamp.

To achieve this, it is necessary that we first study the profound Dharma teachings and then try to gain some experience through

practice. Otherwise, if we are lazy in our Dharma study and practice, how can we expect to inspire others? You can't, for example, expect people who are unable to support their own families, to be of any help to others.

There seems to be a popular view nowadays that Buddhists are people who approach life and its problems in a pessimistic and avoidant way. For example, some Chinese filmmakers always seem to include a character in their movie who becomes a monk or a nun because they have failed in life and have no option but to run away. This is highly misleading. They would probably be more respectful if they were dealing with another religion here. Of course, we cannot deny that there are some monks who do fit that profile. There are indeed some individuals who join Buddhist groups because they can't fit into society. But a few individual cases cannot be taken as representative of Buddhists as a whole.

Authentic Buddhist practitioners, monastics in particular, carry the great responsibility of working for the welfare of themselves and others. The vast majority of them are highly skilled, have an excellent work ethic, and are more than capable of supporting their own families. They have chosen, however, to apply their skills and wisdom to a far greater cause—that of working for the benefit of all sentient beings. So, it is a gross misunderstanding to say that Buddhism is a pessimistic and avoidant religion.

On a positive note, I have noticed over the years that many Buddhists do feel greatly enriched and empowered by their spiritual practice. They have come to realize that Dharma practice is not just about fixing their own problems by practicing alone. They have a far greater responsibility to propagate the Dharma so that they can benefit as many people as possible.

It is important that every monastic and lay Buddhist practitioner cultivates such an altruistic aspiration. If we have that altruistic intention, whatever affliction we might have or suffering we go through, it will not disturb us. On the other hand, if we only think of ourselves all the time, we will forever be complaining about something or other, and will always be troubled. We will be incapable of solving even the slightest problem. Therefore, we should aspire to propagate the Dharma for the benefit of others.

Recently, we are holding the 100,000 Vidyadharas Dharma Gathering, which lasts for fifteen days, with four sessions of chanting every day. Since there are many sangha gathered here at the moment and we are reciting *The King of Aspiration Prayers* each day, at every session, it is an excellent opportunity for us to make aspirations. When we recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers*, we should immerse ourselves in the prayer and aspire to be endowed with the strength and ability to propagate the Dharma and to benefit beings in all our future lifetimes. We should seize this opportunity since we

never know when we will have the chance to attend such a major gathering of the sangha again. Even if we only recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* once a day in this way, it will have great benefit, since aspiration has the power to bring all our wishes to fruition. It is also crucial meanwhile that we pray fervently to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as the great masters of the past, so that they constantly grant us their blessings to develop this capacity. Blessings may be intangible, but their power is incredible.

In summary, when we follow the path of Dharma, we shouldn't focus solely on our own personal practice, such as reciting the name of Amitabha or the Mani Mantra. Of course, this will have some benefit. It is more important, however, that we all strive to inspire other people to follow the Dharma. The Digital Age that we are now living in is an age of great opportunity. Those who make good use of information technology can have a huge impact on a great many people. If used to disseminate the Dharma, it can help bring a large number of people onto the path of virtue. On the other hand, if it is used for negative ends, many people will end up in the lower realms.

Life is short. As Buddhists, it is important that we focus on whatever might help us on our path to liberation. At the same time, if we can inspire other people to follow the Dharma, even if only once a month, or once a year, it will have great benefit.

2 Do Not Overly Secularize Dharma Teachings

When sharing the Dharma with others, especially on profound topics such as the Twelve Links or the Four Noble Truths, it is important that we teach in accordance with the sutras and classical commentaries and do not overly secularize the teachings. Otherwise, if we try to explain these topics by using mundane examples it won't reveal their true depth or meaning.

Once, I listened to a renowned professor giving a lecture on the twelve links of dependent origination, but he didn't speak about their true meaning. He tried to explain this profound topic through a story centered around a businessman and a beautiful lady. Sure enough, he used Buddhist terms like ignorance, formation, consciousness, name and form, but the story was quite irrelevant to the twelve links of dependent origination.

Tibetan Buddhism does, in fact, place great importance on an in-depth study of the twelve links of dependent origination. In our course on the prajnaparamita sutras, it is an important and profound topic that requires special study. So this shouldn't be approached too lightly.

When we give Dharma teachings, it is important that we teach properly. We shouldn't dumb down the meaning just because we think the audience won't understand us. Even if the audience

doesn't completely get the message, they will still derive great benefit from hearing such profound teachings.



Lecture Five

More than 2,500 years ago, our root teacher, Buddha Shakyamuni, through the span of his life, displayed the attainment of enlightenment, the turning of the Wheel of Dharma, and the final entering into parinirvana, to those disciples who had a close karmic connection to him. Afterwards, the Buddhadharma was preserved and upheld by noble beings of both the Mahayana and Theravada vehicles, mainly the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and the Sixteen Arhats, who were all accompanied by large retinues. In this way, the Dharma has been sustained and continues to thrive in our world up to the present day. Through the study of this prayer, we will learn how the Buddhadharma has been preserved and protected by sublime beings in different worlds, through their miraculous powers and samadhi.

People vary in their beliefs, attitudes and openness of mind, hence there are different reactions when they listen to the stories and teachings associated with this prayer. Some people readily accept these stories, without too much doubt. Even if they're not so familiar with the Dharma teachings, by virtue of their own insight, they can understand the meaning behind the stories and the lessons they contain. Other people, however, even though they may be highly intelligent and exceptionally knowledgeable about secular matters, seem to struggle when they study the Dharma. This is probably due to the fact that they have had little contact with

Dharma teachings in their past lives. Even if they try to remember one or two Buddhist stories or verses that they've heard, they seem to have forgotten all about them within a couple of days, as if anything to do with Buddhism gets wiped from their minds immediately, leaving nothing behind.

Such people need to purify their karmic obscurations and make an especially strong effort to study the Dharma. Even if they lack any connection to the Dharma from their previous lives, if they apply themselves, they can still make progress and transform their minds by making an effort now. This applies to older people too. Even though they are no longer young, if they exert themselves in Buddhist training, they will reap the rewards of all their hard work.

I'd like all of you, therefore, to apply yourselves as fully as possible to the continuous study and practice of the Dharma. This is crucial. Nowadays, many people seem to treat attending a Dharma teaching like going to watch a movie. They listen to one lecture and if they're interested, they might continue, but if they become bored, they'll soon leave. Dharma study, however, is not a short-term undertaking—you need to have an ongoing commitment to it, if you are to get anywhere. This is something that I'd like to stress to you.

Another point I'd like to emphasize is the value of collective study. Currently, since there's a major Dharma assembly taking place here at the Academy, you will need to attend the assembly during the day and listen to my lecture in the evening. This will make your days feel busier and you may become tired as a result. But please bear in mind that the whole purpose of the collective study and practice of the Dharma is to serve as a support and encouragement for you. If you engage in this for even just a short time, the merit can be immense. Without such support, you will find it difficult to motivate yourself since human nature is habitually inclined towards laziness. If we didn't schedule the teaching in the evening, many of you would probably spend that hour in a state of distraction. You can be your own judge as to whether you are a conscientious student or one who lacks mindfulness and easily falls into distraction. In general, without the supervision of a teacher, most students become sluggish and lazy. Therefore, please make an effort to attend the Dharma lectures every evening.



Elder Ksudrapanthaka

KSUDRAPANTHAKA

THE ELEVENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the elder Ksudrapanthaka,
Who dwells on Vulture Peak mountain,
Surrounded by one thousand nine hundred⁵ arhats,
And makes the gesture of equanimity with his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

⁵ The English translation of the prayer states that there are one thousand nine hundred arhats who surround Ksudrapanthaka, however according to Khenpo Sodargye's Chinese translation of the prayer from the Tibetan original, the number is one thousand six hundred.

The eleventh elder is called Ksudrapanthaka, but is more commonly known by the name, Chulapanthaka. There are different pronunciations of his name. The latter one is more common and appears most frequently in the original Chinese Buddhist texts. Chulapanthaka resides on Vulture Peak Mountain where the Buddha turned the Second Wheel of Dharma. He is surrounded by 1,600 arhats and makes the gesture of equanimity with his two hands. According to the *Nandimitravadana*, Chulapanthaka resides in Isadhara Mountain or Plow Holder Mountain. We pray to him for the longevity of all Dharma teachers and the proliferation of the nectar-like Dharma in this world.

The Life Story of Chulapanthaka

Stories from the life of Chulapanthaka are quite well-known and popular. There are many stories about him in the Buddhist Canon, for example in the Vinaya, and some of them have even been made into animated films or other such media. But please keep in mind that I'm not sharing these stories with you just as some sort of entertainment! Nor am I exaggerating them to try and impress you, like parents who try to excite their children with fantastical tales.

In the same way that worldly people can learn a lot about ancient cultures and lifestyles by studying their traditional stories, we can

gain deep insights into the teachings when we study the original Buddhist source stories. Some of these stories might stretch our imagination and seem too fantastical to be true, from an ordinary point of view, however, the storylines and settings can often have a great relevance to the lives that we lead today. So when you listen to these stories, please try to discern the truths and profound meaning that lies behind them, rather than simply take them on face value.

1 Birth and Childhood

In Shravasti, during the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, there lived a brahmin couple whose children all died as soon as they were born. This was an immense source of suffering to the family.

The Brahmin's wife became pregnant once more and her husband became extremely worried that the child would not survive, just like the others before. When she heard about his concerns, his neighbor, an elderly lady, told him to call her when as soon as the child was born, as she knew how to keep the baby safe and well.

Later, when the child was born, the Brahmin called for the elderly lady. She wrapped the new-born baby in a piece of white cloth and told the maid to take the child to a busy road intersection—whenever she saw a shramana or brahmin pass by, she was to respectfully ask for their blessing and say, “The baby pays

homage at your sage feet.” If no accident had occurred by sunset, the child’s life would be safe and secure. The maid then carried the baby to a major road junction nearby.

Many shramanas and practitioners passed by, and the maid did exactly as she had been instructed by the old lady and requested blessings for the child. That day, the Buddha also happened to walk along that road. The maid prostrated to the Buddha and requested his blessing. The Buddha blessed the boy and said, “May the child live a long life free from illness and be protected by the gods. May all his parents’ wishes be fulfilled.” By sunset, the child had survived the day and was well and healthy. Because the boy received blessings by the roadside, he became known as Mahapanthaka, which means “Great Road”.

Afterwards, the Brahmin’s wife became pregnant again and gave birth to another boy. When the second child was born, the family followed the instructions that the old lady had given them just as before. The maid, however, was feeling tired this time, so she stood on a smaller junction that fewer people used. Still, shramanas, brahmins and other spiritual practitioners did walk along this road and, as instructed by the elderly lady, the maid asked each of them to bless the child so that he would live long and fulfill the wishes of his parents. They all gave their blessings as requested.

Since the boy received blessings on a minor road, he was named Chulapanthaka, which means “Little Road”.

When they grew up, the two Panthaka brothers developed in very different ways in terms of their intelligence and abilities. Both of them studied a number of different subjects with their teacher. The big brother was remarkably smart and could memorize everything that he read, even if he only glanced at it once. The little brother, however, was exceedingly dull and couldn't remember a single passage that he was taught. As soon as the teacher moved onto the next point, he had already forgotten the previous one.

The teacher lamented, “Mahapanthaka progresses in his learning and insight very quickly, even if I only teach him a little, but this younger son retains nothing—he forgets what I've taught him as soon as I move on to the next point. I can't teach him anything.” The father of the brothers then thought, “Not all Brahmins are learned, he will still be able to manage in life because at least he comes from the highest, Brahmin caste.” Because Chulapanthaka was so dull-witted, people also called him “Dumb Road”. Even though Chulapanthaka was slow-witted, his father loved him very much and brought him with him wherever he was invited.

2 Becoming a Monk

Years later, the Brahmin fell seriously ill and despite all the treatments that he received, he was unable to recover. Before he died, he said to Mahapanthaka, "I have no worries about you after I die. But Chulapanthaka is slow-witted, please do not look down on him. As his brother, you should always help him in times of need and danger. Please remember these, my final words." After the old Brahmin passed away, the two Panthaka brothers cried in grief and held a funeral for their father.

Later, Mahapanthaka met a bhikkhu who inspired him to follow the teachings of the Buddha. He developed strong faith in the teachings, left his home and became a monk. From that moment onwards, the two brothers became separated.

Mahapanthaka studied and practiced diligently and soon afterward attained arhathood. He then decided to travel to Shravasti to pay homage to the Buddha in person. Leading a retinue of five hundred disciples, Mahapanthaka set out on his journey.

On learning that Mahapanthaka and his retinue were coming, the people of Shravasti came out to welcome him. At that time, Chulapanthaka was homeless and forced to beg in order to sustain himself. He heard about Mahapanthaka's grand arrival and wanted

to greet him also. Upon meeting again, Mahapanthaka felt terrible about the plight of his little brother and how poor he had become.

Mahapanthaka said to Chulapanthaka, “Why don’t you think about becoming a monk?” Chulapanthaka replied, “Dull and slow-witted as I am, who would accept me as a student?” He would, of course, have been more than happy with any arrangement as long as there was a roof over his head. Mahapanthaka wondered whether Chulapanthaka had sufficient merit to take ordination, so he used his miraculous powers and insight to check. Mahapanthaka saw that his little brother did indeed have sufficient karma to take ordination and that he was the one who should ordain him. He therefore invited Chulapanthaka to join the sangha.

3 Attaining Arhathood

After accepting Chulapanthaka into the sangha, Mahapanthaka taught him the following verse and instructed him to recite it:

*Create no evil in body, speech, and mind,
Nor harm any beings in the world.
Be mindful that the object of desire is empty,
And stay away from meaningless austerity.*

Later it came time for the monastics to enter the annual summer retreat, which usually lasted for three months. There was a tradition

in the sangha that at the end of the summer retreat, each monastic was required to report on their progress in the practice to their preceptors. During those three months, however, Chulapanthaka was unable to memorize the verse that he had been taught, no matter how hard he tried. So, when the time came for the monks to report their progress, Chulapanthaka was unable to say anything.

Despite the fact that many people looked down upon him, Chulapanthaka still couldn't find any way to improve himself. As a last resort, he was encouraged to visit his brother and to ask for his help. Mahapanthaka contemplated how best he could help him—whether through gentle or harsh means. Through meditation, he observed that the only way he could help his little brother was by giving him a very strong scolding. Therefore, he seized Chulapanthaka by the neck, threw him outside the room, and yelled at him, "How stupid can you be that you can't even memorize a single verse of teaching within three months? You are a shame to the whole sangha!" Scolding his brother in this way, he asked him to leave.

Chulapanthaka was so heartbroken, he couldn't stop weeping. He thought, "I am neither a good monk nor can I support myself as a layman. Now that my brother has given up on me, what can I do with my life?" At that time, the Buddha passed by and asked him why he was crying. Chulapanthaka replied, "I am so dull

and slow-witted that my teacher has asked me to leave. Now, I don't know what to do with myself." The Buddha then said, "It is unreasonable for your teacher to dismiss you like this. He is not the one who obtained the holy Dharma after three asamkhya kalpas of training. It is I who obtained the holy teachings through kalpas of assiduous practice. Come with me and study as I advise."

So, the Buddha took Chulapanthaka away with him and assigned Ananda to first teach him how to read. Since Chulapanthaka was illiterate, Ananda started by teaching him the basics. But however hard Ananda tried, Chulapanthaka couldn't make any progress. After a while, Ananda could bear it no more and sent him back to the Buddha, asking the Buddha to assign other duties to him.

The Buddha then told Chulapanthaka to repeat just one phrase, "Remove the dust, remove the impurities." However, Chulapanthaka was unable to even remember this simple sentence and still couldn't find a way to improve his memory. Observing this, the Buddha realized that he was heavily obstructed by his past negative karma, which was very heavy, so in order to help him purify those obscurations, the Buddha asked him to polish the shoes of all the monks.

Even though Chulapanthaka was happy to serve the sangha and to do this task for them, many of the bhikkhus wouldn't allow him

to touch their shoes. The Buddha then said to the monks, “You should allow Chulapanthaka to serve you so that he can accumulate merit and purify his obscurations. While he polishes your shoes, you should also teach him that simple sentence.” Afterwards, the bhikkhus allowed Chulapanthaka to serve them and they all taught him the short phrase he was supposed to recite. Every day, Chulapanthaka would repeat this phrase while polishing their shoes.

Through this method, Chulapanthaka’s karmic obscurations were gradually diminished. As a result, he was able to remember this phrase and began to contemplate its inner and outer meaning. He realized that “outer impurities” refers to the dirt that requires physical cleaning, while “inner impurities” refers to the afflictive emotions that exist within the mind, the eradication of which is far more important. By following the Buddha’s teaching, and through subsequent contemplation and practice, Chulapanthaka uprooted all his mental afflictions and attained arhathood.

4 Instructing the Bhikkhunis

The fact that someone as dull-witted as Chulapanthaka was allowed to become a monk and remain in the sangha drew a lot of criticism and scorn from non-Buddhists of other schools. They said that if

the sangha allowed someone as incredibly stupid as Dumb Road to be ordained, the monastics must be full of unworthy types.

In order to counteract this slander and to reveal Chulapanthaka's true qualities, the Buddha asked Chulapanthaka to give teachings to the bhikkhunis. It was the custom that every two weeks, a renowned and respectable bhikkhu would be assigned to give a teaching to the assembly of bhikkhunis. On this occasion, the Buddha told Ananda to inform the nuns that Chulapanthaka would be giving them the next teaching.

When they heard this, many of the bhikkhunis felt insulted because they knew Chulapanthaka's reputation for being very stupid and how within three months, he had failed to memorize even a single verse of teaching. Furthermore, there were many exceptional scholars amongst them who excelled in the Tripitaka. It felt absurd to have someone as famously dumb as Chulapanthaka come and teach them. However, since Chulapanthaka had been assigned to teach them by the Buddha, they were scarcely in a position to refuse him.

Within the bhikkhuni sangha, there were twelve mischievous nuns who came together and made a secretive plan to humiliate Chulapanthaka. Six of them set up a Dharma seat in the temple and raised it to a very high level, without any steps for the Dharma

teacher to climb up onto. Another six went around to advertise the upcoming teaching, saying that a master of great repute would be coming. They wanted as many people as possible to come, to witness Chulapanthaka's embarrassment.

When the time arrived, the audience was far larger than usual. Chulapanthaka came into the hall and noticed the high seat that had been put out for him. Knowing that it had been set up that way in order to embarrass him, he miraculously stretched out his right hand until it reached the top of the seat and pressed down until it came to a normal height that he could comfortably sit on. After taking his seat, he declared to the audience, "In the past, I was unable to memorize so much as a single stanza of teaching even if I tried for three months. Now, if I am to expound upon the meaning of that one verse in detail, seven days and nights would still not be enough."

As Chulapanthaka began to teach, the bhikkhunis were amazed and developed true faith in him. Before his teaching finished, many of those present attained the state of stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, or arhathood, and some even generated the unsurpassable bodhicitta.

5 Displaying Miracles

We also find stories about Chulapanthaka in sutras such as the *Udanavarga* and the *Dhammapada*. Since Chulapanthaka was famous for being so dull-witted early on in his life, some people wouldn't recognize his realization and still looked down upon him even after he attained arhathood. At Larung Gar, some of our monastics are viewed in that same way too. Even though they might be well-respected Dharma teachers, their family members fail to honor them and even treat them with disdain. Ironically, the people most likely to look down on monastics are their own family members.

One day, Jivaka invited the Buddha and the sangha for lunch but didn't ask Chulapanthaka to join them. When they arrived at his home, Jivaka first offered the Buddha some water, but the Buddha refused to accept it. When Jivaka asked the Buddha why, he replied it was because Chulapanthaka hadn't been invited to come with them. Jivaka tried to excuse himself by saying that since Chulapanthaka was unable to memorize a single word of the teaching, even though he tried for several months, there really was no point to invite him. The Buddha, however, made it clear that he wouldn't accept so much as a sip of water unless Chulapanthaka was also present.

Jivaka ordered one of his servants, therefore, to find Chulapanthaka and invite him to lunch. Foreseeing this, Chulapanthaka multiplied himself into a thousand monks, all of whom looked completely identical. These “copies” filled the entire mango grove of Amrapali, each of them busy with a different task. When the servant called out for Chulapanthaka, they all answered together in unison. The servant was unable to discern who the real Chulapanthaka was and returned to his master dejectedly. The Buddha then asked the servant to return once more but this time to invite Chulapanthaka with true sincerity. He would then be able to find the real Chulapanthaka. The servant did as the Buddha instructed and returned with Chulapanthaka.

In order to make Jivaka aware of Chulapanthaka’s supreme qualities, the Buddha purposely created an opportunity for him to reveal his miraculous powers. The Buddha asked Ananda to give his alms bowl to Chulapanthaka, who sat far away at the other end, and then asked Chulapanthaka to pass it back to him without leaving his seat. Through his miraculous power, Chulapanthaka offered the bowl back to the Buddha without leaving his seat. When they saw this, the entire assembly, Jivaka included, were filled with awe and generated great faith in Chulapanthaka.

6 The Reason for Chulapanthaka's Dullness

Why was Chulapanthaka so dull-witted and lacking in intelligence before he became an arhat? In one of his former lives, Chulapanthaka was an erudite Tripitaka master who was very stingy when it came to sharing Dharma teachings with others. He wouldn't teach other people so much as a single verse of Dharma and this became one of the main reasons why he was so slow-witted in his later lives.

As we can see, the karmic consequence of being selfish with the Dharma is extremely grave. A selfish attitude is of course fairly common among worldly people. Some people are not generous with material things, while others are miserly when it comes to sharing knowledge. Someone might, for example, be expert in a specialized field of knowledge, but be unwilling to share what they know with other people because they are afraid they might eventually outshine them. We should be very mindful of this kind of attitude. Whatever knowledge we acquire, Dharma teachings especially, we should be willing to share with other people as much as we can. Otherwise, no matter how smart we might be now, it may not stay that way in our next life.

Drawing Inspiration from Chulapanthaka's Story

There are a lot of insights and lessons we can learn from studying Chulapanthaka's stories. Firstly, that we should never lose faith in our Dharma study. If we are slower than others in our Buddhist studies, we should not lose faith in ourselves. No matter how dull we might be, it is unlikely that we are unable to memorize a single verse of teaching within three months. Sure, we may have a terrible memory, and it may take us three days or three hours to memorize a stanza, but even so, we will still be doing a lot better than Chulapanthaka. And since even Chulapanthaka was able to attain arhathood in the end, there's no reason at all why we should lose heart.

Secondly, serving the monastic sangha is a very powerful way to purify negative karma. This is something we should all keep in mind. Most of us will not be able to become enlightened right away. If we fail to find inspiration in our practice of the Vajrayana or Mahayana teachings, especially in the early stages, or find that our practice has even regressed, no matter how hard we try, we should not feel downhearted. Instead, we should focus as much as possible on serving the monastic sangha in order to purify our negative obscurations. This is something that is clearly mentioned

in the tantras and is a point that H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche repeated to us many times.

If you are a Dharma teacher, for example, and feel that your spiritual practice is stuck and not developing, you should instead focus on serving the sangha, whether through physical work or other voluntary activity. Over time, as your karmic obscurations gradually diminish, your wisdom will naturally shine through and help your practice to progress. It is essential, therefore, to actively serve the sangha.

Thirdly, we should be mindful of our conduct so that we do not set a bad example and attract criticism. It is very important that Buddhists conduct themselves correctly and avoid bringing the sangha into disrepute. As we saw earlier, because Chulapanthaka was very dull-witted when he first joined the sangha, the sangha was mocked by outsiders, who accused the monastics of being full of all sorts of unworthy types.

This is one reason why Buddhism stresses the importance of monastics maintaining unimpaired sense faculties. If someone is born with impaired faculties, they are not permitted to be ordained. Some Buddhists, however, even though they have all their sense faculties intact, still invite criticism because of their bad behavior or sloppy appearance. In this respect, monastics from

the Chinese Buddhist tradition seem to do rather better. In any Chinese Buddhist temple that you go to, even though the sangha might be quite small, each one of the monastics will be mindful of their conduct and how they appear.

Some Han Buddhist practitioners who have spent time in the Tibetan regions for their monastic training, however, seem to have regressed. After staying with a lama or at a monastery in the Tibetan regions, they behave recklessly when they return to the Han regions, as if they are totally free of all attachments. They act as if they are an accomplished mahasiddha, like Master Ji Gong—they purposely keep poor hygiene, don't wash their face or hair, wear dirty clothes, and so on, thinking this is a sign of non-grasping. Clearly, they haven't understood what "freedom from attachment" really means.

We are not denying the fact that certain practitioners have acquired supernatural powers or realization and behave unconventionally in order to benefit beings. Nevertheless, most ordinary people like myself are very much influenced by first impressions. When I see a practitioner who is shabby and unkempt in their appearance, I think they must be a very messy person. While one's external appearance might not matter too much in the Tibetan regions where water and sanitary supplies are difficult to come by, when we are in other places, we should pay attention to this. In summary,

it is crucial for Buddhists, both monastics and lay people alike, to be mindful of their conduct and appearance, so that they fit in with local customs and are accepted by others.

Lastly, you should know that the attainment of supernatural powers is by no means the highest goal of our spiritual path. As we can see from Chulapanthaka's stories, people of his time were very much impressed by displays of miraculous power. Actually, people today are not so much different! When they see someone demonstrate a supernatural power, they are easily taken in and develop faith in them. The Buddha himself remarked in several texts how ordinary beings are easily impressed by supernatural powers.

Nonetheless, the Buddha discouraged and even prohibited the open display of miraculous power. Of course, there are exceptions. Accomplished masters such as arhats and bodhisattvas are permitted to use miraculous powers, if it is for the benefit of other beings. But apart from that, normal monks and nuns are not allowed to display their powers. So, when people ask me, "Why don't you Buddhists demonstrate your supernatural powers?" I always respond, "The Buddha prohibited it."

Of course, miraculous powers are difficult to achieve. Accomplished masters who do possess such powers will never easily demonstrate their abilities, such as knowing the minds of others,

unless under exceptional circumstances. In this way, many potential obstacles have been avoided. That's why the Buddha discourages his followers from demonstrating miraculous powers.

Furthermore, the display of supernatural power is not the ultimate means by which to liberate sentient beings. The Buddha said that the greatest supernatural power is the ability to guide people to realize the truth of all phenomena through teaching the Dharma. This is the supreme approach that the Buddha himself followed in order to benefit beings, so that they could all come to a personal realization of the true nature of phenomena.

Demonstrating supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly, easily impresses people and arouses their curiosity. But this is only a temporary reaction. They will just think that this person is amazing and remarkable. They will not, however, gain any real benefit from these miraculous displays, nor gain any miraculous powers themselves, just by witnessing them. So supernatural powers are not so important.

Many people nowadays talk about super-cognition and claim to know your thoughts or what will happen to you in the future, just like fortune-tellers. I'm not saying that divination and prediction have no use, but rather that we shouldn't overly depend on them, to the point that we become excessively anxious and feel our

lives are utterly doomed. As long as we act positively as much as possible, we don't need to worry about our future since the merit this will accumulate will surely lead us to happiness. If we commit negative acts, however, the resultant suffering will ripen upon us sooner or later. This is the natural law of cause and effect which is non-deceiving and inescapable.



Elder Pindolabharadvaja

PINDOLABHARADVAJA

THE TWELFTH ELDER

We pay homage to Pindolabharadvaja,
Who dwells on the eastern continent of Purvavideha,
Surrounded by a thousand arhats,
And holds a text and alms bowl:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The twelfth arhat is called Pindola Bharadvaja. Pindola practiced *dhutanga*, the thirteen austerities. He resides in the eastern continent of Purvavideha, or Aparagodaniya, according to the *Nandimitravadana*. He is surrounded by 1,000 arhats and holds a text and alms bowl in his hands. We pray for his blessing so that the Dharma teachers may live long and the Dharma may prosper.

Pindola appears frequently in Chinese Buddhist history. Many great masters, such as Master Daoxuan of the Song Dynasty, have met Pindola in person. In Han Buddhism, there is a tradition of offering alms to 1,000 monks; this practice is still observed in several monasteries at Mount Wutai and in other sacred sites. It is said that on such occasions, Pindola will always come to receive the offering, usually appearing as an old monk. According to the description we find in Chinese source texts, a distinct feature of the elder Pindola is his long eyebrows and white hair.

The Life Story of Pindola

Stories about Pindola can be found in the Vinaya texts as well as the Agama sutras. There, it is said that he was the son of a minister. From birth, he was surrounded by wealth and enjoyed a happy life. After growing up, Pindola recognized that worldly enjoyments such as wealth and so on are utterly pointless and like a dream or illusion. Mundane matters and pursuits were meaningless to

him. Therefore, he took ordination and practiced diligently. Soon enough, he achieved arhathood. Afterwards, Pindola gave Dharma teachings in many different places, upholding the thirteen ascetic practices. Nowadays, in countries like Thailand, there are still practitioners in secluded mountains who continue this lifestyle.

1 Why Does Pindola Remain in the World?

Why did Pindola remain in the world after the Buddha's parinirvana? One explanation is that it is to atone for his display of miraculous powers against the wishes of the Buddha. It is recorded in the Agama sutras that once, when the Buddha was in Shravasti, Anathapindika's daughter wished to make a grand offering to the Buddha and his retinue. She lived, however, in another country which was far away from Shravasti. Summoning her immense faith in the Buddha and his noble qualities, she faced the direction where the Buddha was staying and prayed sincerely that he would accept her invitation. The Buddha responded to her request and asked all the arhats with their miraculous powers to attend the offering the next day.

When the time came, the Buddha and the sangha flew to receive her offering. At that time, the elder Pindola was sewing his monastic robe and had forgotten all about the invitation. See, even arhats can be forgetful, let alone us ordinary people! So, we can be

forgiven if we forget things sometimes. Some people scold others saying, "How could you forget about it? You shouldn't!" Well, there's no such thing as "should" or "shouldn't" when you forget something!

When Pindola remembered the appointment, it was already late. He looked with his power of clairvoyance and saw that the Buddha had already arrived and was about to receive the offering. So he stuck the sewing needle into the ground, put on his robe, and began to fly in their direction. Since the thread from the robe was still attached to the needle, the entire mountain became uprooted and flew along behind him. This might sound like a fantastical myth to us, but this is exactly how it is recorded in the ancient Buddhist texts.

While Pindola was flying through the sky with the mountain following behind him, a pregnant lady looked up and saw the great spectacle. She became terrified that the mountain might fall on her and as a result, tragically, had a miscarriage and lost her baby.

When Pindola arrived, the Buddha reprimanded him severely, "Not only did you come late, but you've also committed the act of killing. You have committed a very grave fault. After I enter into nirvana, you will have to remain in this world to safeguard the

Dharma until Buddha Maitreya comes.” I guess the Buddha found a good reason to force him to stay in the world after he was gone, in order to protect and uphold the Dharma.

2 Pindola and King Udena

In the *Dharmagupta Vinaya*, there’s a story about Pindola and King Udena. At that time, Pindola was residing in the country of Kosambi. King Udena had a great deal of respect for Pindola and would often visit him. Even so, and since a long time, Pindola would never stand up to receive the king when he saw him coming. Finally, King Udena became fed up with his behavior and thought to himself, “I am the great king, but whenever I visit Pindola he remains seated rather than stand up to welcome me, as if he were the highest among us all. Tomorrow morning I’ll visit him again and if he still doesn’t rise to greet me, I’ll have him killed.”

The king was due the next day. The great arhat was well aware of his intentions and thought to himself, “If I stand up to greet the king, as an ordinary being, he is undeserving of such respect, and the negative karma this will create will cause him to lose his crown. However, if I don’t receive him with this formality, the king will commit the heinous act of killing an arhat, which will cause him to fall into the hell realms. Both will bring him great suffering.”

Thinking that it would be better for the king to lose his throne rather than to fall into the hell realms, as the king approached, Pindola climbed down from his seat and took seven steps towards him. Because of this, the king did not kill him. However, the karmic result of making a holy being greet an ordinary being in such a manner was by no means insignificant. Seven days later, while King Udena was out on an excursion, he was captured by another king and held prisoner for seven years. After this calamity, he regained the throne.

The Importance of Being Humble in the Presence of the Sangha

As we can see from this story, an ordinary person lacks the merit to be honored by a noble being, for example, to be ceremoniously greeted by a large number of monastics. That is why those who are cautious of karmic law always conduct themselves with humility when in the presence of the sangha.

In around 1988, a Geshe-la of the Gelug tradition from India visited Larung Gar. His Holiness praised this Geshe very highly and arranged a great assembly of the sangha to welcome him. A tulku accompanied the Geshe to Larung Gar and led the way. This tulku was very mindful of karmic law and took great care in discerning virtuous from non-virtuous actions. As soon as he saw His Holiness

and the sangha ahead, he quietly moved to the back and entered the Academy through another entrance. Later, we asked him, “We heard that you had come, but couldn’t find you anywhere. Why did you take a different way?” He said, “So many sangha members came today, how could I allow myself to be welcomed by so many monastics and sublime beings when I am such an undeserving man?”

When I travel to different places, I always feel concerned if a group of monastics comes to greet me. In particular, when I accompanied H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche on his trips, one of the things that made me most uncomfortable was to follow behind him when he was being welcomed by a large sangha. Thinking that there must be many noble beings among the crowd, I would become very worried. For someone as highly accomplished as His Holiness, a mutual exchange of homage between sublime beings is fine. But for anyone walking behind His Holiness, an ordinary person like me, we certainly didn’t deserve to be welcomed by a noble one.

But nowadays, many laypeople seem to enjoy being greeted ceremonially by the sangha. I heard that often, sponsors who make big donations to monasteries are welcomed by lines of monastics when they visit their temples. They feel proud and enjoy having khatas placed around their necks. This is wholly inappropriate. While it is admirable that laypeople cultivate merit through generosity, when

in the presence of monastics, laypeople should maintain a humble attitude and be respectful, because at the very least, monastics wear the Dharma robe and represent the Three Jewels. In a word, laypeople should always be respectful of the monastics.

On the other hand, monastics shouldn't be overly demanding, ordering laypeople to do their bidding. Some laypeople have developed a weariness or disgust towards the monastics, because of their experience with one or two examples. Why is this? I've heard instances, for example, when a monastic, soon after getting to know a layperson, immediately asks to borrow one of their homes and ends up staying there for a long time. Of course, you can always say this is due to their karmic connection. It is important, however, that monastics pay special attention to the feelings of laypeople when they associate with them. They should observe their facial expressions and reactions very closely, so as to avoid creating any problems for them in the future.



Elder Panthaka

PANTHAKA

THE THIRTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Panthaka,
Who dwells in the heaven of Thirty-Three,
Surrounded by nine hundred great arhats,
And makes the gesture of teaching the Dharma while
 holding a text:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

This elder, Panthaka, is the Mahapanthaka who appeared earlier, the elder brother of Chulapanthaka. He dwells in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three and is accompanied by nine hundred great arhats. With his hands, he makes the mudra of teaching the Dharma while holding a text. We pray for his blessing so that all the Dharma teachers in the world may have a long life and the Dharma may spread and thrive.

The Life Story of Panthaka

Panthaka was born into a Brahmin household and later grew to be a highly intelligent and talented Brahmin teacher. There were often 500 students following him. He taught his students the Brahmin teachings and traditions and was well respected by them.

One day, the residents of the city heard that Moggallana and Shariputra, two of the Buddha's foremost disciples, were due to arrive. They all rushed out to welcome them and hear their teachings. Panthaka inquired after their qualities, wondering why they attracted so much attention. He learned that both had been born as Brahmins, the highest caste, but had forsaken everything to become Buddhist monks. Panthaka was confused and couldn't make sense of their decision to give up their status and privileges in order to take monastic vows. One of his students held Buddhism in high esteem and said to Panthaka, "Moggallana and Shariputra

are exceptional teachers who have attained arhathood. You should go and listen to their teachings. You will definitely benefit from it.” So Panthaka had the idea to go to their teachings privately, in secret, and to listen to what they said.

Later, when Panthaka didn’t have classes, he walked out of the city on his own to search for Dharma teachings. Although he didn’t meet the two arhats, he ran into another bhikkhu who was practicing walking meditation under a tree. Impressed by the bhikkhu’s deportment and speech, Panthaka asked the bhikkhu about the Buddha’s teaching. In response to Panthaka’s request, the bhikkhu introduced him to the ten virtuous and ten non-virtuous actions. After hearing this teaching, Panthaka felt a sense of conviction and told the bhikkhu that he would return once more before he left.

Later, Panthaka revisited the bhikkhu, and this time he was taught the twelve links of dependent origination. After this teaching, Panthaka realized that the reality of samsara was quite different from what he had been taught previously and that the Buddha offered an alternative view of the world, a truth that was both profound and highly analytical. He asked the bhikkhu if he could become a monk since he wished to join the sangha in order to actualize the Buddha’s teaching. The bhikkhu agreed and gave him ordination.

The bhikkhu then taught Panthaka that, according to the guidance of the Buddha, there were two primary paths in Buddhism—one was to read and recite the sutras and the other was to meditate on the teachings. He asked Panthaka, “Which one would you like to follow?” Panthaka answered, “Both!” Panthaka thenceforth devoted himself to reciting sutras and practicing meditation. Some time later, he attained arhathood. He then sent for hundreds of his former disciples to come to see him and guided them to take refuge in Buddhism. Later, the Buddha instructed Panthaka to dwell in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three and to safeguard the Dharma through his miraculous power.

One of the inspirations we can draw from this story is what we should do after we become a Buddhist. Nowadays, Buddhists seem to be unclear about this. Every role—civil servant, doctor or any other—has its respective duties. So does a Buddhist. Once you begin practicing Buddhism, the first thing you need to do is listen to Dharma teachings and to reflect on what you hear. The second is to meditate and actualize those teachings. These are the two tasks that Buddhists need to accomplish.

Spiritual Treasure of Humanity

Modern-day Buddhists will probably have different views and opinions about these stories. Those who have a strong affinity to

Buddhism will readily accept them, others will remain neutral, while still others may react against or even feel offended by some of the views that are expressed. Buddhism itself accepts and includes everyone—all types of beings and all kinds of opinions. Concerning the latter two attitudes towards Buddhism, it is important that whoever feels this way should analyze their thoughts very carefully since we ordinary people are easily influenced by our subjective thoughts and feelings, many of which are utterly baseless.

Our thoughts, feelings and ideas are not reliable. What we consider to be pure, may well not be. We might think that something exists without ever changing, but the truth is opposite. For example, we saw a red pillar yesterday and think that it still exists in exactly the same way today, and will do so tomorrow. This is, however, our deluded perception which projects an idea of permanence on something—in truth, the pillar is impermanent and constantly changing. This being the case, whenever we hear a new story or idea, we should think about it rationally, before we jump to a quick conclusion based on our subjective feelings.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there was a great master called Gendun Chopel. He said that people's minds are constantly changing from their youth up to their old age, so any thought that they have now, at this moment in time, is unreliable. This is very true and applies to all of us. When we were little, we were attached to our

toys. Then as we grew up, we discarded those toys. When we are young, we are attached to certain people, but when we are more mature, their influence over us fades. In mid-life, we tend to cling to our careers and families. But as we grow older, we find that these things too, are ultimately pointless. Finally, when we examine all the things that we have grasped onto during our life, we find them to be devoid of any real meaning. It is just as the Buddha explained in the texts—everything in life is simply an illusory display, insubstantial and unreal. If we realize this point, it counts as a form of enlightenment or breakthrough.

The Buddha's teachings are indeed unexcelled and extremely profound. That is why Buddhists, as they go deeper and deeper, find the Dharma teachings to be so inspiring. If they were shallow and simplistic, we would soon tire of them and seek something else. The truth of the matter is, wise people in the past and those in the present have all come to the conclusion that the Buddhist teachings are a supreme and precious gift to humanity. My deepest wish is that every single being might understand something of the Buddhist teachings. We don't have to understand all the Buddhist teachings, but just to grasp any one aspect of them, would bring immense benefit to us in both our present and future lives.

Therefore, we pray to these sublime beings for their blessing, so that more and more Dharma teachers will appear in this world to

expound the truth and that they will live long for the welfare of beings. To constantly pray like this is itself an auspicious practice.



Lecture Six



Elder Nagasena

NAGASENA

THE FOURTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Nagasena,
Who dwells on the slopes of Mount Meru,
Surrounded by one thousand two hundred arhats,
And holds a vase and monk's staff:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Let's continue with our study of this prayer. Mainly, it comprises of verses of praise for each of the sixteen principal arhats. We have now reached the fourteenth elder.

We pay homage to the noble elder Nagasena, or Lu'i De as he is known in Tibetan. The name means, "Army of Nagas" or "Host of Dragons". Nagasena dwells on the slopes of Mount Meru, surrounded by 1,200 arhats. He holds a monk's staff in one hand and a golden vase in the other. There are bells on the staff which, as they ring, awaken beings from ignorance. The golden vase contains nectar that can wash away the pain and afflictions that torment beings. We pray to the elder Nagasena for his blessing so that all great teachers may live long and always turn the Wheel of Dharma, and the teachings of the Mahayana and Theravada Vehicles, and of the Sutrayana and Vajrayana, may remain long in this world for the benefit of sentient beings.

Accounts vary concerning the exact abode of Nagasena, depending on the text. In the *Nandimitravadana*, Nagasena is said to dwell on the mountain of Mount Pandava. In other sources, Nagasena is said to reside on Mount Vipularparshva. In Tibetan, this mountain is called "gos-yatjs", which is the highest of the five mountains that surround Rajagriha. According to Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Nagasena dwells on a mountain called Mount Urumunda.

The Life Story of Nagasena

Nagasena was born into the royal family of a North Indian kingdom. As prince of his kingdom, he was destined to become king but, having witnessed the immense suffering caused by war, taxation, hard labor, and so on, he was repelled by worldly life and all its mundane concerns. He realized that if he ascended the throne, his entire life would be occupied by these meaningless activities. Therefore, he renounced his claim to the throne, went to see Buddha Shakyamuni, and requested to become a monk.

According to some historical sources, Buddha Shakyamuni was 55 years old when he received Nagasena and granted him ordination. After becoming a monk, Nagasena studied the Tripitaka assiduously and soon attained arhathood. To repay the Buddha's great kindness in guiding him to enlightenment, Nagasena went to the Heaven of the Four Great Kings to teach the Dharma to the devas.

Among the Buddha's disciples, Nagasena is praised as being the foremost exemplar of non-attachment. Although many of the Buddha's disciples were strong renunciants, Nagasena was the most renowned for giving up his royal title and all the privileges associated with it.

People today are often surprised when promising young students who graduate from prestigious universities like Tsinghua University or Peking University in China, give up their careers to join the monastic sangha. But honestly speaking, this isn't shocking at all. Throughout Buddhist history, there have been many monks who were princes before they joined the sangha. So it's hardly surprising if a person who is neither royalty nor from a national leader's family decides to take ordination.

The Supreme Way to Repay the Buddha's Kindness

There are two inspirations we can take from the story of Nagasena. Firstly, the greatest benefit that we can gain from the Dharma is nothing other than enlightenment itself, since only enlightenment can lead us to ultimate happiness. Once I asked someone whether he was the happiest person in the world and he said that absolutely he was not because he hadn't yet attained enlightenment. I couldn't agree more with what he said—enlightened beings are the happiest of all. There is a book called, *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret & Science of Happiness* written by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. In the introduction to the book, the publishers present Rinpoche as being the happiest man in the world. If this is the case, he must be a highly realized master, as there's nothing in our mundane world that can approach this ultimate state of happiness.

The only stable and secure happiness we can attain is the joy of enlightenment. If we achieve enlightenment, we will experience unchanging joy. The happiness of ordinary people who lack enlightened wisdom is, on the other hand, transient and changeable. They might be happy one day with everything that they have, such as their wealth and status, but easily become unhappy the next day. Money doesn't bring true happiness, nor does high social status, nor a nice family. These things can only bring a state of transient happiness which can easily change into a negative experience. Therefore, the most meaningful thing we can do with our life is to seek enlightenment, which brings about ultimate happiness.

Another inspiration we can draw from Nagasena's life story is that the best and the only way to repay the Buddha's kindness is to teach the Dharma and guide others onto the path of awakening. Anyone who has achieved enlightenment through practicing the Dharma will willingly repay the Buddha's kindness by inspiring others onto the path of Dharma.

As practitioners who have not yet reached enlightenment, if we wish to repay our teacher's kindness for the benefit we have received from the Dharma, we can offer them material goods or serve them with our body and speech. This will certainly please them. However, the best way we can repay their kindness is to practice the teachings according to their instructions and to strive

to benefit beings. Whether your teachers or your Dharma friends notice or not, your effort in this direction will be the best way to express your gratitude.



Elder Gopaka

GOPAKA

THE FIFTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Gopaka,
Who dwells on Vihula, king of mountains,
Surrounded by one thousand four hundred arhats,
And holds a text in his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The fifteenth elder is called Gopaka, or Bechepa in Tibetan. He is also called “The Concealed One” since, according to some sources, his name in Sanskrit means “to be concealed” or “to be covered”. The elder Gopaka dwells on Vihula, king of mountains, where 1,400 arhats surround him. In the *Nandimitravadana*, Gopaka is said to reside on Gandhamadana with 900 arhats as his retinue. He holds a Dharma text in both his hands. We pray to Gopaka with the aspiration that the long life of all great teachers may remain indestructible, like a vajra mountain, and that the wish-fulfilling Dharma, the source of peace and happiness, will spread widely and unceasingly throughout the three worlds.

The Concealed One

The life story of this elder is mainly recorded in *The Hundred Deeds* and the *Avadanasataka*, which respectively appear in the Tibetan Tripitaka and the Chinese Tripitaka. In *The Hundred Deeds*, his story is entitled, “The Story of Deluded”. The storyline is mostly consistent with what we find in the *Avadanasataka*, except that at the end, Gopaka is said to have been killed after being kicked by a dairy cow. Based on the prayer that we are studying, we know that Gopaka vowed in the presence of the Buddha to remain in this world in order to protect and uphold the Dharma. In this respect, the account in *The Hundred Deeds* appears to be at odds with that commitment. In the *Avadanasataka*, the story has a different ending

which I think better matches what is stated in the prayer. So I will briefly talk about his life story based on the Chinese version.

Gopaka had an unusual birth under difficult circumstances. He was born into a wealthy householder's family but from the moment he was born, his body was covered in boils. This is like cases we may hear about or see on TV of people who are born with all types of physical defects, such as hypoplastic limbs. As Gopaka grew up, the boils developed into a mass of sores that covered his entire body, oozing blood and pus. It was unbearable to look at.

Unable to watch him suffer, Gopaka's parents sought out many different doctors and treatments in order to cure him, but all to no avail. In *The Hundred Deeds*, it says that his parents could not bear to see his worsening condition, so they covered his body with fragrant water and clothes. Probably his parents did this because they didn't want to expose the unsightliness and stench of his body to other people. Because of this, he became known as "The Concealed One" or "The Covered One".

Years later, as Gopaka grew up, he still could find no cure. Some people who were aware of his condition suggested that he go to see Buddha Shakyamuni, since the Buddha was renowned as being the "Great Healer of All Diseases". Gopaka went to see the Buddha as suggested. The Buddha then spoke to him of the

suffering that arises from the five aggregates. Upon hearing this teaching, Gopaka expressed deep remorse and confessed all his negative karma. No sooner had he made his confession than all the sores on his body completely disappeared. Gopaka was overjoyed and requested the monk's vows from the Buddha. After taking ordination, he practiced the teachings diligently and with the ripening of causes and conditions cultivated in past lives, swiftly attained arhathood.

As we can see from this story, the Buddha was not only the supreme healer of the mind, he was also an extraordinary physician capable of curing many rare illnesses. People who suffer from rare diseases that cannot be cured by conventional means can still be treated by the extraordinary remedy of the Buddha's blessing and his many skillful means. The many accounts that appear in the Vinaya texts bear testimony to this. Actually, the Buddha was not only a supreme healer for the people of his time, he is still a supreme healer and his teachings can offer a cure for even the worst mental afflictions and physical illnesses that we suffer from today.

Two Wealthy Elders

Other disciples asked the Buddha what karma Gopaka had created in his past lives that caused him to be born with a body full of

sores? And how was it possible that he attained arhathood so quickly? The Buddha replied as follows.

Long ago, two wealthy elders endured a hostile relationship with each other. One of them won the favor of the king by making offerings of great riches to him. This elder then accused the other of plotting against him. With the permission of the king, he viciously lashed the other elder and sprinkled poison over his wounds. This caused the elder who was victim to this false accusation and terrible attack to develop a deep revulsion toward worldly life and samsara. He gave away all his wealth and went to live in a forest, meditating alone there. Since he practiced without the guidance of a teacher, he gained the accomplishment of a solitary realizer.

He then reflected how being wrongly accused and physically assaulted had actually been a positive circumstance for him, since it had helped him to attain his realization. In order to repay the huge kindness of his assailant, the solitary realizer decided to help him avoid the karmic retribution that would inevitably result from his terrible actions. Therefore, he displayed miraculous powers to the elder who then developed great faith in him and confessed all his wrongdoings.

To avoid the karmic consequences of having harmed his rival, the elder engaged in all kinds of virtuous activities directed towards

the solitary realizer, dedicating them accordingly. However, his negative karma was not completely purified and he still had to undergo many physical hardships in his subsequent lifetimes. In his last rebirth, he still suffered from severe illness due to this karma.

The first elder was reborn as Gopaka in this, his last life. By “last rebirth”, we mean the final rebirth in samsara. Beings in their last rebirth transcend samsara and are no longer bound by suffering since they attain liberation within that lifetime. Even though Gopaka was in his last rebirth, he still could not escape the results of his previous negative karma.

How then did Gopaka attain arhathood so swiftly? In *The Hundred Deeds*, it says that during the time of Buddha Kashyapa, he was a monk who observed his precepts very purely throughout his entire life. The positive karma of his pure conduct ripened in his last life, such that Gopaka was able to renounce his worldly life quite easily and attain arhathood within a short time.

Gopaka was also able to reach fruition so quickly because of the times that he lived in. As we know, the Buddha’s teaching is divided into four periods regarding the extent to which the Dharma survives. They are the fruition period, the accomplishment period, the transmission period, and the period when only symbols remain.

The time when the Buddha was present is called the fruition period since practitioners attained fruition very quickly. This also explains why Gopaka became an arhat in such a short space of time.

As we can see from Gopaka's life story, unfavorable circumstances can be an incentive for us to follow the spiritual path and reach attainment. This is borne out by many of the stories contained in *The Hundred Deeds*. Some Dharma practitioners may have similar experiences as well. Having gone through certain challenges, such as being treated unjustly, feeling abandoned, or experiencing trauma from different life events, they sought solace from the teachings and finally found the right path in Buddhism. In such instances, as Venerable Longchenpa said in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, we should see those adverse circumstances and obstacles as incentives to our spiritual path. We can be grateful to anyone who caused us obstacles, of any kind, since this became the positive inducement that led us onto the path of Dharma.

Our Connection to Buddha Shakyamuni and His Retinue

In summary, the Buddha instructed that after his passing, Gopaka should dwell on Mount Vihula to preserve and uphold the Dharma in the world. As followers of the Buddha, if we supplicate the elder Gopaka, he will definitely fulfill his promise to maintain and

protect the Dharma. The prosperity of the Dharma is dependent on the blessings of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats and devas, so it is very important for us to continuously supplicate them.

In particular, as his followers, we share a very special connection with Buddha Shakyamuni and his teaching. Therefore, if we pray to him, we will receive extraordinary blessings. As it is recounted in *The White Lotus: An Extensive Biography of the Lives of Buddha Shakyamuni*, even though we will certainly receive blessings and accumulate merit by praying to other tathagatas, since Buddha Shakyamuni vowed specifically to care for and enlighten beings of this world, we share an exclusive connection with him, and will therefore receive swifter blessings when we pray to him.

Besides praying to Buddha Shakyamuni, it is equally important to pray to his close disciples. Among the retinue of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Eight Great Bodhisattvas are the Buddha's primary regents, his close sons, according to the Great Vehicle. If we pray to the Eight Great Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya, and Manjushri, through their blessing, all the qualities that we aspire towards on the Mahayana path, such as bodhicitta and non-dual wisdom, will easily arise in our minds. If we wish to attain the qualities emphasized in the Lesser Vehicle, such as renunciation, non-attachment, and so on, we should invoke the noble arhats.

Through their blessing, these qualities will more easily arise in our minds.

This is similar to the way that we normally form bonds in our life. A guru and his students, for example, share a very special bond because of the relationship of direct transmission. Many students have such a special connection with a teacher. In the same way, followers of Buddha Shakyamuni share a close karmic connection with him and his retinue. Thus, it is crucial for us to pray to the Buddha and his disciples, particularly the Sixteen Arhats and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas.

That is why in almost every Tibetan monastery, in addition to the central place given to Buddha Shakyamuni, we will also find images of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and the Sixteen Arhats. There is nothing random or haphazard about the images that we see inside a Buddhist temple. They are there for a reason. The Four Great Kings are also often depicted at the entrance to a monastery, since they also play an important role in safeguarding the Dharma. We will cover them in a later verse.



Elder Abhedya

ABHEDYA

THE SIXTEENTH ELDER

**We pay homage to the noble elder Abhedya,
Who dwells among the king-like Snowy Peaks,
Surrounded by a thousand arhats,
And holds an enlightenment stupa:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!**

The last elder that we pay homage to is Abhedya, or Michepa in Tibetan. 'Mi' in Tibetan grammar is a form of negation just as 'a' is a negation in Sanskrit. Thus his name means, "The Indestructible" or "The Unparalleled". Abhedya received this name because he was unparalleled in wisdom, discipline, compassion, and many other enlightened qualities. When I searched for the name Abhedya in the Chinese sutras, I found only a few results. Later, however, I found mention of him in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, but under another Sanskrit name, Pilindavatsa. This name appears more frequently in the Chinese sutras.

Abhedya dwells among the king-like Snowy Peaks of the Tibetan regions. I guess, therefore, that Tibetan masters can seek him out if they find it difficult to see the other elders. The location could be somewhere around Mount Kailash since it is well known that many arhats reside there. As many Nepalese troops guard the border in that area, I imagine they must receive lots of blessings! Abhedya is encircled by 1,000 arhats and holds an enlightenment stupa in his hands. Sometimes the arhats vary in their appearance in the Han and Tibetan traditions, for example in terms of the symbols that they hold, but in this case he appears identically in both. We pray that through his blessings, the teachers may live long and the Dharma may prosper.

One Who Practices Compassion on Seeing Suffering

The elder Abhedya is quite a distinguished figure. He was born into a Brahmin family in India and was an exceptionally refined child. As he grew older, he took great joy in performing acts of generosity. Eventually, he grew weary of worldly life and requested ordination when he met the Buddha. After becoming a monk, he delved deep into the Tripitaka, practiced accordingly, and finally attained arhathood.

A striking attribute of Abhedya is his strong compassion. In some sutras, he is said to be “foremost in compassion”, and the Buddha praised him as “One Who Practices Compassion on Seeing Suffering”. Generally speaking, as stated in the *Digha Nikaya*, bhikkhus are prohibited from talking about or displaying their supernatural powers and instead should conceal them. Nonetheless, when moved by compassion, Abhedya did use his miraculous powers on certain occasions, but each time he was later excused by the Buddha.

1 Saving His Nephew

In the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, there is a story of how Abhedya used his powers to help his nephew. His nephew was originally a

non-Buddhist. Later, through Abhedya's persuasion, his brother-in-law agreed to allow his son to follow the Buddha and study the Dharma. Abhedya decided to teach his nephew in person, so the boy made his way to the vihara where Abhedya was staying. On the way there, however, the nephew was abducted by bandits, and this news reached Abhedya from a deva who had observed this. After careful consideration, Abhedya decided to rescue his nephew by using his miraculous powers.

Other bhikkhus learned about this incident and reported it to the Buddha. The Buddha then asked Abhedya why he had used his miraculous powers—was it because his relatives were involved, or for other reasons? Abhedya denied that it was for any personal reasons or favor. He explained his intent as follows, "If I hadn't used my supernatural power to save my nephew, a family would fall apart, the non-Buddhists would take delight in the tragedy, and many Buddhists would be discouraged from coming to the vihara." After examining his motives, the omniscient Buddha excused him.

2 Helping a Poor Girl and Her Mother

Another example comes from the *Pancavargika* (*Five Part Vinaya*) which recounts the story of how Abhedya helped a destitute young girl. Once, Abhedya encountered a young girl in a village who was

extremely distressed. From the girl's mother, Abhedya learned that the village was holding a special event that day and everyone was getting dressed up in their best clothes to attend. The girl, however, came from an impoverished family and couldn't afford any fine clothes to wear, therefore she was very sad and kept crying. Out of compassion for the distraught girl, Abhedya used his supernatural power to turn pieces of grass into stunning pieces of jewelry made of finest gold that she could wear.

The girl went to the event beautifully adorned in these dazzling pieces of jewelry. Everyone who saw her was struck at how stunning she looked and, out of jealousy, reported to the king about the jewelry that she was wearing. The king himself had never seen such exquisite gold and had nothing to equal it in his own palace, so he summoned the girl's mother and asked whether she had acquired some riches that she was keeping secret from him? The mother denied having any hidden treasure and told the king it was because Abhedya had used his special powers to turn ordinary grass into purest gold. Thinking that she was lying, the king became extremely angry and threw her into prison.

When Abhedya came to the village for a second time, he saw that the girl was crying once more and asked her what the reason was. The girl told Abhedya how her mother had come to be imprisoned because of the gold jewelry that she had worn that day. Abhedya

promised the girl that he would rescue her mother and headed straight to the prison. There, the warden told him that he needed permission from the king first, before he could release the girl's mother. So Abhedya flew to the king's palace and asked the king to immediately set the girl's mother free.

The king said to Abhedya that this woman had discovered a treasure of great value but had kept it for herself without offering any to him. Abhedya then told him that there wasn't any treasure—he had created these stunning pieces of gold jewelry from ordinary grass. To convince the king, Abhedya took a stick and struck a pillar in his palace to show how he could transform ordinary objects into pure gold. As he struck the pillar, the entire building was transformed into a resplendent golden palace. Witnessing this miracle, the king was convinced of his power and immediately gave the order to release the mother. People who saw and heard about this miraculous display developed strong faith in the Dharma.

3 Saving the Sangha's Property

On another occasion, the sangha had just finished their summer retreat in Rajagriha. The place where they were staying became filled with food and other provisions offered by their followers—hence it became the target of bandits. One night, a group of bandits broke into their residence and bundled up all the goods. As they were

attempting their getaway, a deva alerted Abhedya to what was going on. Abhedya used his miraculous power to surround the residence with an iron wall. When the bandits tried to leave with their haul, they came up against the wall which blocked their way. When they dropped the goods, the wall completely disappeared. They made seven attempts to leave and at last gave up and ran away empty-handed.

Other bhikkhus heard about this incident and reported it to the Buddha, saying “Abhedya used his supernatural powers again!” The Buddha then spoke to Abhedya and learned that he had done so with the sole intention of protecting the sangha’s property. Therefore, the Buddha did not reprimand him. Abhedya seemed to be excused quite often like that!

One with a Strong Habit of Arrogance

There is another interesting aspect to the elder Abhedya. Abhedya had a strong karmic habit of arrogance resulting from his taking rebirth as a brahmin for 500 lives. As you know, the caste system in India is comprised of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, the last being the lowest laborers. Abhedya often addressed others as “Shudra” due to this habitual tendency. Whether it was an ordinary woman or a king, Abhedya could not help but call them Shudra. Despite the fact he was an arhat and had cut through his

afflictive emotions, he still continued this habit and managed to offend quite a lot of people. Even when apologizing for having addressed somebody as Shudra, he still called them Shudra!

The following story is recorded in the Buddhist texts. Abhedya would often cross the River Ganges in order to beg for food. Each time that he wanted to cross the river, he would snap his fingers and say to the goddess of the river, "Shudra, stop the river!" The river would then cease to flow and a pathway would appear in the middle that he could walk across. Finally, one day, the river goddess became fed up with his arrogance and complained about him to the Buddha. The Buddha told Abhedya to apologize to the goddess. Abhedya folded his palms together and said to her, "I'm so sorry, Shudra. Please don't be angry with me." Since he was an arhat, Abhedya didn't have any intention to be rude, but in the eyes of others, his apology was not only insincere but deeply offensive!

Because of this strong habit, the Buddha once reprimanded Abhedya saying, "As an arhat, shouldn't all your disturbing emotions have been eradicated? Why do you still carry on this old habit of speech from your past five hundred lifetimes?" Afterwards, Abhedya managed to rid himself of this habit once and for all.

Overcoming Our Strong Habits

Since even some arhats are still subject to their past habits, it is hardly surprising that we ordinary people are prone to strong habitual tendencies too. In a meeting yesterday, some of those present made nicknames for the others and addressed them in derogatory ways such as big-nosed, shorty, etc. Even though they had been asked not to, they just couldn't shake off this habit. In addition to that, I notice that some monastics speak very loudly, which I assume is a tendency they have developed in this life. Having stayed in all sorts of environments, especially big cities which are full of crowds and noise, when they come to a silent place, it is difficult for them to speak softly all the time.

Regardless of how stubborn our habits may be, all of us—monastics and laypeople alike—should make every effort to change them. While it may be impossible for us to get rid of all of them at once, still, we need to be mindful of our behavior and speech and try to counteract our negative habits as much as possible. In particular, monastics should try to speak softly and avoid being too loud or disturbing. Though this might not be so much of a problem in big cities where among throngs of people, the volume of one's voice doesn't matter so much, in a peaceful place like Larung Gar, this could easily disturb others.

For instance, if someone is walking close to where dozens of practitioners are conducting solitary retreat in their own wood cabin, and suddenly shouts out, “Do you have any yak dung for sale?”, or “How much is that cabbage?”, or “Are we getting any electricity today?”, this can be extremely disturbing to the meditators. If one of those meditators hears what he or she says, for example about the cabbage, it might give rise to all kinds of thoughts in their mind, like “What! A cabbage?” They may have been visualizing the Buddha but when they hear this remark, all they see is a cabbage in front of them! They then begin to wonder how much the cabbage costs, what to make for lunch, and so on and so forth. This kind of disturbance should definitely be avoided. We need to be very mindful of this.

Concerning how loudly one speaks, I have stressed this many times in my lectures. But since even arhats can find it difficult to change their habits, it is not surprising that some people continue to be loud despite all the reminders I have given them. A few days ago, I saw two female students chatting together ahead of me. I was walking well behind them, at least 50 meters apart, but I could still hear their conversation very clearly. It was all about meaningless topics—not only were they not doing themselves any good, they were also potentially disturbing other practitioners around them.

According to the precepts, if we wish to speak to someone, we snap our fingers to get his or her attention, especially when in a practice session. If you call out loudly, “Hey! Hey!”, your voice will surely affect the people around you. If a talkative person starts to gossip in the middle of a quiet place where others are trying to memorize texts, read sutras, meditate, or contemplate the teachings, this behavior will disrupt their cultivation of virtue. It’s very likely that whoever does this isn’t so keen on study or practice themselves.

Even worse than this, some people seem to like to pick conflicts. They don’t care about the other people around them because they get swept away by their strong emotions, even to the point of losing control. While showing off their “superhuman power”, they are not at all mindful of others. I hope you will all be considerate of others when you talk in public. We are responsible for ourselves, are we not?



Upasaka Dharmatala

UPASAKA DHARMATALA

THE SEVENTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble upasaka Dharmatala,
Whose hair is in a topknot and who carries volumes
of Dharma,
Who sees Amitabha in the sky before him,
And who holds a fly whisk and vase:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

All the sixteen sages that we have so far talked about are ordained arhats whereas the seventeenth elder, Dharmatala, is an upasaka (layman). His hair is tied in a topknot and he carries volumes of Dharma texts on his back. His clothes are similar to those worn by some Tibetan yogis, or the way that Padmasambhava is sometimes depicted in paintings, wearing robes. He looks into the space before him and visualizes Buddha Amitabha, his main deity, constantly. The fly whisk that he carries brings cool relief to sentient beings suffering from the burning heat of afflictions and anguish. The vase that he holds in his other hand provides waters for the Sixteen Arhats to bathe, wash their feet, and so forth.

Who Is Dharmatala?

In relation to the Sixteen Arhats, there is no mention of Dharmatala in the source texts of the Han Buddhist tradition, but he is referred to in Tibetan Buddhist records. He is said to be a Chinese layman who lived during the reign of Emperor Suzong in the Tang Dynasty, the son of Emperor Xuanzong. Since the time of Xuanzong, the Tang Dynasty began to decline and the country entered a period of instability. Emperor Suzong, however, was very supportive of Buddhism and made significant contributions to ensure the propagation of its many aspects. For example, he revered Master Amoghavajra as his teacher and received empowerments from

several different masters. He also ordered the construction of eighty-one Life Liberation Ponds across the length of the country.

It is said that Emperor Suzong sent a noble sage to India to invite the Sixteen Arhats to the Han regions, for the summer retreat. This noble sage might have been Dharmatala, or another enlightened monk, depending on which text you consult. The Sixteen Arhats were invited to join the summer retreat in a particular monastery, but no records have been found that identify which one it was. During the retreat, Dharmatala served them closely. Since the weather was very hot, he fanned the arhats with his fly whisk to provide them with cool relief and used the vase to carry water to wash their feet.

In Tibetan paintings, Dharmatala is always shown to be accompanied by a tiger. The tiger served as protector of the Sixteen Arhats during their summer retreat. Since the Sixteen Arhats were staying near a large forest and frequently went into the woods during their retreat, to ensure their security, Dharmatala, who was by then an accomplished mahasiddha, tamed a ferocious tiger and commanded it to protect them.

Some texts say that Dharmatala was in fact a laywoman. I wasn't sure about this claim, so I asked Khenpo Depa the other day if he could verify this. Khenpo-la confirmed that Dharmatala is indeed

said to be an upasika in some Buddhist records. The tiger that accompanied her protected her from being harmed by people with malicious intent. Since she lived in a forest, she needed to be especially careful to safeguard her precepts. I've seen thangkas of Dharmatala but still can't tell whether it is a man or woman, since the artists have skillfully depicted her in a gender-neutral form.

Either way, what we do know is that Dharmatala is a truly remarkable sage. As mentioned at the beginning, this prayer was composed by the great Kashmiri Pandita, Shakyashri. He purposely added Dharmatala as a seventeenth elder, therefore he/she must have possessed extraordinary qualities. Otherwise, since the Sixteen Arhats are no ordinary monks, they would not have responded to an invitation unless it came from someone very special. Dharmatala must have used extraordinary skillful means to supplicate them. Also, in the Tibetan texts, Dharmatala is clearly referred to as a "noble one". In the Tibetan text, he is called "the sublime upasaka" in this verse, but in the Chinese translation, his title has been abbreviated so as to preserve the meter.

Dharmatala is said to be an emanation of Avalokiteshvara. Given that Avalokiteshvara regards Buddha Amitabha to be his principal deity, Dharmatala also visualizes Amitabha and prays constantly to him. Therefore, if we recite this prayer continuously, it will create the favorable condition for us to take rebirth in Sukhavati.



Dhritarashtra
The Guardian King of the East



Virupaksha
The Guardian King of the West



Virudhaka
The Guardian King of the South



Vaishravana
The Guardian King of the North

THE FOUR GREAT KINGS

We pay homage to the Four Great Kings,
Who are mighty and wear the armor of diligence,
And who guard well the teachings of Buddha
In the four directions: east, south, west and north!
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Next, we pay homage to the Four Great Kings, the four gods or deities who live on the lower slopes (fourth level) of Mount Meru in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and who guard the four cardinal directions of the world. To be specific, Dhritarashtra guards the east, Virudhaka the south, Virupaksha the west, and Vaishravana the north. Wearing the armor of diligence, the Four Great Kings guard each of the four directions and safeguard the Buddha's teachings through their miraculous power. We pray to the Four Great Kings for their blessings and invoke them to protect the Dharma and to secure the longevity of all Dharma teachers.

The Two Naga Kings and Two Garudas

Each of the Four Great Kings has their own distinct features and specialty. Different teachers explain this in different ways, for example: Since Vaishravana means "Son of He Who Has Heard Many Things", this king serves as a reminder that we need to increase our knowledge and become skilled in worldly affairs. Virupaksha in the west is often depicted with a dragon coiled around his body which represents change; it reminds us to be mindful of all the different kinds of change that are constantly taking place in the world around us. Dhritarashtra is often shown playing a stringed-instrument, which tells us that whatever we do, we should neither be too tense nor too loose, but follow the middle

way. Virudhaka carries a sword which symbolizes wisdom that cuts through afflictive emotions.

How did the Four Great Kings become lords of the world and protectors of the Dharma? When His Holiness was teaching *The Hundred Deeds*, he shared the following story with us. In times past when Buddha Kashyapa appeared in the world, two naga kings and two garudas lived on the slopes of Mount Meru. Because the garudas were the natural enemies of the nagas, the naga kings always had to be careful to avoid the garudas' harm. Later, the naga kings took refuge in the Three Jewels and the garudas were no longer able to harm them by force. Learning that this protection had come from taking refuge vows and observing the precepts, the garudas also went to see the Buddha, took refuge and followed the basic precepts.

After that, they became good friends. Together, they acted in accordance with the teachings of Buddha Kashyapa. Upon their death, they prayed to be renowned as lords wherever they were born and to uphold the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni. So, by the power of their aspiration, they were reborn as the Four Great Kings and protect all those who uphold the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni.

The Four Great Kings and the Days of Observance

In *The Sutra of the Four Great Kings*, it is said that the god Indra commanded the Four Great Kings to watch over humanity and to observe their behavior. This happens six times every month, on the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 29th, and 30th days respectively. These days are known, therefore, as “Days of Observance”. The Four Great Kings come to the human world on these days, watch over people’s behavior and offer their blessings. It is similar to the pledge that Padmasambhava made to his human disciples, before departing for the Raksha land of Ngayab Ling—that he would visit the human world on the tenth day of every Tibetan month.

Generally, if we fail to remember and invoke a particular buddha or deity, they will not appear to us. On the other hand, if we do recollect them, they will manifest before us. This is exactly what the Buddha stated in the scriptures—that he would always appear before those disciples who think of him. There are, however, certain celestial kings and sublime beings who made a special commitment to offer blessings on specific days and even if we don’t purposely recollect them, they will still bestow their blessings upon us at those times.

Many Buddhists mark these days by engaging in special practices, such as performing sojong on the 30th and making a tsok offering on the 25th. These traditions relate to specific commitments made by buddhas and bodhisattvas and can bring us great blessings and benefit. The same applies to the Four Great Kings who have been charged to come to our world and watch over humanity on these Days of Observance. Although *The Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *The Sutra on the Mahayana Principle of the Six Paramitas*, and *The Sutra of the Four Great Kings*, each offer different versions of when these Days of Observance occur, generally, the 8th, 10th, 15th, and 30th of every month are commonly regarded as especially significant days.

The Importance of Observing Special Days

I hope that all Buddhists will recognize the importance of these special days and try to perform virtuous deeds on them. For example, on the 8th, 10th, 15th, and 30th of every month, we should make special offerings to the Three Jewels.

When I was little, I had a neighbor who was an old monk. He made a great impression on me because of all the routines and customs that he followed. Making offerings on those special days was one such habit. Now, since I'm so busy every day with many different duties, I'm not able to make daily offerings to the Three Jewels as I used to, but I have maintained the good habit of making

offerings on those special days. For instance, if today is the 8th, an auspicious day, I would uncover my precious thangkhas, display them properly, and make offerings in front of them, even if only a lamp, since it is very important to make offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas on those special days.

Nowadays, from what I observe, young Tibetans seem to be increasingly affected by the degenerate times that they live in and they forget all about these traditions. On auspicious days, most young Tibetans watch TV, browse the Internet, chitchat, go for a coffee, or do other mundane things, just as usual. They don't think about performing virtuous deeds.

They don't, for example, say on the 15th of each month, "I should make offerings to the buddhas and recite some mantras", "Even if I couldn't observe life-long vows, today I'd better keep the precept of not eating after noon", "I should uphold the eight precepts today", "I should do some prostrations in front of the Three Jewels", "Since virtues and non-virtues multiply exponentially on this special day, I should refrain from sexual misconduct, false speech, and other negativity", or "Although I'm nothing like the monastics who observe pure precepts their whole life, as a Buddhist, I should at least do some practice or accumulate some positive actions on this special day."

Many young people seem to have lost the habit of performing virtuous deeds on special days. Tibetan elders, however, hold much precious knowledge and have observed these traditions throughout their entire lives. This is why I admire the older generation of Tibetans so much. Sadly, as they pass away, the knowledge and traditions that they hold may not get passed down to future generations.

These days, more than ever, we have access to all sorts of information—we become good at using the internet, commenting on others, and discussing a drama or TV show. This kind of knowledge, however, will hardly bring us any benefit—and will only end up contaminating our minds. It is of no substantial value for our present or future lives. However, because the world is more and more corrupted by materialism and over-consumption, this kind of valueless knowledge is nonetheless encouraged and widely disseminated. As a result, spiritual values and teachings that truly benefit people inevitably become undervalued. Many people disregard them, feeling they are not compatible with mainstream science. Some even attack spirituality, saying “It is superstition”, “It is nonsense”, or “It is old-fashioned thinking”. They think that a progressive society doesn’t need these outdated practices. However, if such priceless spiritual teachings are disregarded, can we really say this is a progressive society?

Praying Constantly to the Four Great Kings

In both the Tibetan and Han Buddhist traditions, the Four Great Kings are usually displayed prominently at the entrance of the monastery. The first chamber that you enter in a Han Buddhist monastery is almost always dedicated to the Four Great Kings. Originally, only statues of the Four Great Kings would appear there. From the Song Dynasty onwards, monasteries began to build prayer halls dedicated to Maitreya, in the form of Master Budai. At first, only Maitreya's statue was installed in this hall. Later, however, Maitreya was moved and placed in a central position in the Hall of the Four Great Kings. In the Tibetan regions, almost every monastery has paintings of the Four Great Kings at the entrance, either on the outside or inside of the gate.

No matter what form they take, you will surely see the Four Great Kings when you enter a monastery. When you see them, you should make an aspiration to propagate the Dharma and to protect the lives of the great masters, just as they have done. For example, you can say to yourself, "May I emulate the Four Great Kings and always safeguard and help spread the Dharma!"

It is important to place images of the Four Great Kings inside the main shrine hall, as well as inside our private shrine room, and to pray to them constantly. In addition to protecting the Dharma,

they also grant great blessings and protect all those who uphold and practice the Dharma. Since we are ordinary practitioners, we certainly need their blessing and protection. Never think that you don't need to venerate them since the nature of everything is emptiness. Before we reach that level of realization, we need to engage in positive actions and meritorious activities as much as possible, with all our effort.

The Best Way to Practice the Dharma

In the meantime, since we are habitually inclined to non-virtue, we should summon all our mindfulness and vigilance to guard against negativity.

For true beginners and ordinary practitioners, the best way to practice the Dharma is to recognize one's negative thoughts, try to eliminate them, and practice confession regularly. Of course, it's impossible for us not to make a single mistake each day, just as it's impossible for us not to have any negative thoughts. However, when a negative thought does arise, we should first recognize it and then reject it. If that doesn't work, we should sincerely confess it. This is the approach that every Dharma practitioner should take in their daily practice.

We shouldn't become discouraged by any slight difficulties we may encounter and then give up our Dharma practice. In our daily life,

there are always ups and downs, joy and sadness—it would make no sense if we were to lose faith in life or fall into a depression just because we experienced one upsetting event.

THE FINAL DEPARTURE OF THE SIXTEEN ARHATS

The *Nandimitravadana* explains clearly and precisely how the Sixteen Arhats uphold the Dharma and benefit beings of this world. If anyone helps the sangha in a positive way and with a pure mind, such as making offerings of food, clothing, bedding, cushions, medicine, and so on, the text says that the Sixteen Arhats and their retinues will appear within the sangha, as ordinary beings, to accept the offering. The donors will thereby accumulate even greater merit from their offerings.

In the future, when the human lifespan is as short as 10 years, the world will be full of wars and the Buddha's teaching will temporarily vanish. When the human lifespan gradually increases to 100 years, beings will grow weary of wars and inflicting harm on each other and begin to cultivate virtue. At that time, the Sixteen Arhats along with their retinues will appear in the world, praise and teach the supreme Dharma, and help guide people onto the

noble path. The Dharma will then remain in this world and prosper until the human lifespan reaches 60,000 years.

When the human lifespan is 70,000 years, the Dharma will vanish completely from the world. At that time, the Sixteen Arhats and their retinues will gather at Jambudvīpa and, using their miraculous powers, erect a huge and magnificent stupa made from the seven precious jewels. Inside, they will place Dharma texts and sacred relics of the Three Jewels. They will then circumambulate the stupa, make offerings, and recite prayers of praise.

Afterwards, they will ascend to the sky and declare, in the presence of the stupa, "The world-honored one, tathagata, the complete and perfect Buddha Shakyamuni, to you we pay homage! We have been entrusted to protect and uphold the Dharma so that beings can continuously benefit from it. Now, since beings of the current time are no longer able to benefit from the Dharma, we have fulfilled our promise and are ready to enter nirvana."

Having spoken these words, they will all enter nirvana without leaving a trace behind; their physical forms will completely disappear. The stupa will then sink beneath the earth. From that moment onward, the supreme teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni will vanish forever from this world. A long time later, when the human life span reaches 84,000 years, the next Buddha Maitreya

will appear in the world to guide sentient beings to happiness and liberation.

In conclusion, having now studied this prayer to the Sixteen Arhats, I hope you will all pray to these noble beings to ensure the prosperity of the Dharma and the longevity of all Dharma teachers. Since we are currently practicing magnetizing activity, focusing now on this prayer of *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders* will undoubtedly be an auspicious support to our future Dharma path and activities.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters, to the flourishing of the Buddha Dharma, and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation.

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