

**HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS
TO THE SIXTEEN ELDERS**

Lecture Two

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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*¹ 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

¹ 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.



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