

**HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS
TO THE SIXTEEN ELDERS**

Lecture Three

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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.



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