

**HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS
TO THE SIXTEEN ELDERS**

Lecture Four

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

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



Elder Kanakabharadvaja

KANAKABHARADVAJA

THE EIGHTH ELDER

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

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

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

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

The Life Story of Kanakabharadvaja

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

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

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

The Maidservant Who Became a Princess

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

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

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

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

The Sangha: The Worthiest Object of Offering

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

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

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

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

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

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



Elder Bakula

BAKULA

THE NINTH ELDER

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

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

The Life Story of Bakula

1 One Who Wears Tree Bark

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Beyond Illness and Harm

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 The Man with Two Families

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything Happens for a Reason

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Elder Rahula

RAHULA

THE TENTH ELDER

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

Rahula was the biological son of the Buddha. Some scriptures say that Rahula received this name because he was born during the time of a lunar eclipse¹. According to another source, Rahula means “fetter” in Sanskrit. He received this name because he remained in his mother’s womb for six years, which was a fetter for both himself and his mother.

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

The Life of Rahula

1 Rahula’s Birth

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

¹ In ancient Indian mythology, the celestial monster Rahu (from which the name Rahula derives) was believed to swallow the sun or moon during the time of a solar or lunar eclipse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Joining the Sangha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Attaining Arhathood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sharing the Dharma with Others

1 Our Responsibility

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Do Not Overly Secularize Dharma Teachings

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

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

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

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

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



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