

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA
SUTRA**

Chapter Nine

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

2023 Edition

Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

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

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Chapter Nine

Reciting the Names of Buddhas

Buddha names are all endowed with inconceivable blessing and definitely bring great benefits, regardless of who chant them. It is like medicine. As long as it is properly made or manufactured, it works for its corresponding disease. If you get an illness whose antidote is this medicine, then as long as you take it, you will get better and it does not matter who brings you this medicine, either a doctor or a nurse. The same for buddha names. Anyone can benefit from hearing a buddha name and it does not matter who makes them hear it.

—Khenpo Sodargye

Lecture Nineteen

August 22nd, 2020

BE GRATEFUL, DILIGENT, AND RELAXED

We will continue our study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. So far, our schedule for next week will remain the same as this week and we will study the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* next Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. This could change after one week. Ideally, we would continue with the courses that we have not finished yet, including *The Uttaratantra Shastra*, *The Shurangama Sutra*, and *The Analects of Confucius*. But due to the COVID pandemic and other unexpected circumstances, we will not be able to live stream the teaching as before. If I go ahead and teach them now, many who have followed these teachings will miss the lectures. Therefore, I plan to continue with them later this year or next year when the overall situation would hopefully improve. I will try my best to complete these teachings, as I have vowed, in this life.

Treasure the Favorable Condition for Dharma Study

Because of current conditions, not only my teaching but the teachings of other khenpos and khenmos cannot be readily scheduled. Group studies such as tutorials, discussions, and debates cannot be offered as in the past. Still, we can consider ourselves fortunate that our Dharma studies are still possible with only minor adjustments and that most practitioners are able to continue their own Dharma studies provided that they are self-disciplined and can manage their time.

During a Dharma study, it is essential for us to maintain a stable and undisturbed mind so that we can hear and contemplate the teaching meticulously. This also applies to those who have also volunteered to serve the sangha in addition to their studies. While you perform your duties, you should also strive to stay current with your study. Those who are capable manage to perform well in both their volunteer service and their Dharma study and practice. On the contrary, some fail to have an acceptable result in every aspect, performing poorly in volunteering and in the study and practice of the Dharma. The point is that we should pay attention to every task we have and try our best to perform at the highest level.

I have heard that certain individuals applied to be a volunteer just to earn a free meal. This is an impure and inferior motive. Such an intention will not accumulate any significant merit. It would be even worse if the individual lacks sufficient efficiency in performing the assigned tasks. A better attitude is to think, “This meal is to nourish my body so that I can provide better service.” I commend those who pursue a work-study program for the Dharma. Many people complete their academic studies in Chinese and foreign educational institutions this way. It is good that you study the Dharma while also engaging in volunteer work with an altruistic motive. You will enrich your knowledge in the Dharma while also accumulating a great deal of merit.

Be Content, Joyful, and Relaxed

This is a very unusual year as the world struggles to survive an unprecedented pandemic. Every one of us should treasure whatever we still have. Ashvaghosha says in his *Sutralankara*,

No illness is the foremost benefit.

Being content is the wealthiest.

Virtuous friend is the best relative.

Nirvana is the utmost happiness.

This is a thought-provoking teaching. Indeed, the greatest benefit we can hope to have is to live in this world in good health. Even when we may only have life's necessity and are not materially well-off, if our hearts are filled with contentment and not swell with desires, we are indeed the richest. If we have qualified spiritual teachers or friends who can influence us toward virtue and goodness, they will indeed be our best relatives. In this verse, the last sentence concerning nirvana is perhaps farthest from our reach, regardless if it were the enlightenment of a shravaka, pratyekabuddha, or bodhisattva. Most of us here are fortunate to possess the former three. We are healthy without illness; we are not facing a lot of pressure for surviving; and we have encountered many virtuous Dharma friends. What more can we ask? We have the opportunity to study and practice the Dharma freely! We should all be happy that we live in such a favorable circumstance.

Of course, we should never be overly attached to what we have because it could often lead to suffering. Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyeltsen said in his *Treasury of Good Advice*,

*When love is lavished excessively,
That in itself generates hostility.
Most of the disputes in this world
Derive from close relationships.*

Excessive attachment can become the source of resentment or hatred. Whatever we grasp strongly onto, position power, reputation, a friend, or a lover, it can bring about confusion and bitterness. Therefore, treasure all propitious resources we have at hand but do not grasp too tightly onto them so that we would not sink into a negative mental state that can lead us to affliction.

In a word, be joyful and relaxed. To be relaxed is of great and profound meaning. Regardless of whether it is at work or in your daily life, dealing with family affairs, or engaging in Dharma study and practice, do not be too anxious and attached. Too much stress can have many harmful effects—it may impair our health, result in negative emotions, and quite likely lead to bad appetite and poor sleep. Therefore, it is important to learn to relax in life.

EFFICACY STORY: A FISHERMAN NETTED A STATUE OF KSITIGARBHA

Before today's teaching, I would like to share another story of Ksitigarbha. Once upon a time, there was a state called Ming in old China where people made their living by fishing. One day, a fisherman netted a statue when he cast his net in the sea. The statue seemed to be an image of a monk. Failing to figure out what it was, he discarded it at the shore. Then that night, he had a dream in which a monk of amazing radiance asked him, "Why did you throw me away?" The fisherman asked, "Dear master, who are you?" The monk said, "I am Ksitigarbha. I have been benefiting living beings in the ocean. Through my efforts, half of the living beings there have taken rebirth in the celestial realm. I have become concerned about you and your people so I came into your net."

The fisherman then woke up and felt very regretful. He repented immediately and went to retrieve the statue. Thereafter, he built a shrine to worship the Ksitigarbha statue. Many fishermen paid

homage to the statue which was endowed with great blessing and miraculous power. It brought infinite benefits to the local people for many generations.

From this story, we learn that Ksitigarbha endeavors to benefit sentient beings of all forms, be they animals or humans, on land or at sea. Indeed, the merit and virtue of buddhas and bodhisattvas are truly inconceivable. With our conviction on their merits and virtues and our goal of promoting the Dharma and benefiting beings around us, we should strive to create favorable conditions for other people to make connections with buddhas and bodhisattvas so that they can be saved and inspired by them. Although each of us has different abilities, we should all aspire to spread the names or images of buddhas and bodhisattvas to as many beings as we can.

While it may be difficult to build a formal Buddhist temple in certain places where people usually would not have a chance to hear the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, it is still of great benefit to build a simple shrine to place images of buddhas or bodhisattvas inside. For instance, in some Han regions where people do not embrace Buddhism, you may build a Dragon King Temple by following their folklore while enshrining a Ksitigarbha statue inside, which will indeed bring them benefits. After all, Ksitigarbha manifests in all different forms in various circumstances.

Or, in some other regions where even a shrine is not allowed, you can place the images of noble figures such as Ksitigarbha or Buddha Shakyamuni somewhere obvious in common facilities such as restaurants, coffee shops, or bookstores. Even though many people do not have any faith at all, as long as they pass by and see the images, directly or indirectly they will gain great benefits.

Likewise, if your family members are not so opposed to Buddhism, you may create a shrine at home and worship, for instance, a Ksitigarbha statue so that all family members and guests can see and get connected with Ksitigarbha. As monastics, you should use the holy statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas to bless those who come to your monastery. In certain southern regions in China like Fujian, Buddhists are used to bringing their own buddha statues with them when they visit temples. They place the holy statues of their personal collections in front of the statues in the temples for a short while and then take them home. I am not particularly sure if it is a way to receive blessings or for the statues to be consecrated but they have such customs.

THE REQUEST OF KSITIGARBHA

Now we continue with the ninth chapter, *Reciting the Names of Buddhas*, which discusses the names and merits of ten buddhas. When I translated Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *A Garland of Jewels: Names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*, I asked everyone to recite the names of the buddhas on a regular basis or every now and then. Because the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas are endowed with great blessing, chanting these names would accumulate incredible merit.

In Master Faxian's translation of *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra (the three fascicles edition)*, there is a teaching that says, "In hundreds of thousands of kalpas, to hear a buddha's name is rare." Given that it had been extremely difficult to hear a buddha's name throughout hundreds of thousands of eons, we should feel very fortunate that we can hear in this life the names of Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, and those in this chapter that we are about to cover. This is indeed a good fortune for us.

On the one hand, we have been born into an uncertain and confusing world where evil karma can be overwhelming and negative emotions and afflictions can haunt everyone's mind, causing us untold suffering. On the other hand, we are also living in a bright period in this kalpa when Dharma teachings and the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas remain fully approachable and that the Dharma is still very much relevant.

We need to recognize our good fortune and cherish our human existence and all the favorable conditions that are available to us to pursue our Dharma study. Although I am not that excellent a practitioner, I have encountered such wonderful scriptures and propitious Buddhist statues that even if I only make three prostrations to them every day that it would carry great significance. However, the human body we have obtained is impermanent and fragile, and no one can be certain of when his or her human life will end. All we can do for the moment is to make full use of our energy to engage in Dharma study and practice with this precious human body so as to attain true freedom from samsara.

Chapter Nine

Reciting the Names of Buddhas

At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, for living beings in the future

I will now expound on beneficial matters, so that they may obtain great benefits while in the cycle of birth and death. O World-Honored One, please allow me to speak on this.”

The Buddha told Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “You now give rise to vast kindness and compassion to rescue all wrongdoing suffering beings in the six realms of existence, wishing to expound on inconceivable matters. This is the right time. You should speak at once, for I will enter parinirvana before long. [Such matters] will let you fulfill your vows early, and I too will have no worry about all the beings in the present and future.”



Ksitigarbha requested the Buddha to give him permission to deliver Mahayana teachings to benefit future beings. Usually, it is the Buddha who would give teachings to others. In this case, it was Ksitigarbha who explained the Dharma and the Buddha was just part of the audience. The Buddha gave the permission by saying that “This is the right time.” Regardless of whether it is giving or receiving Dharma teachings, as soon as conditions are favorable for them to be realized, we need to grasp the opportunity and do not procrastinate and miss “the right time” to make progress.

Here the Buddha mentioned that he would enter parinirvana very soon. I am uncertain exactly when the Buddha taught the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Historically, after the Buddha attained buddhahood, he first returned to his kingdom to enlighten his father, King Suddhodana. Later, he ascended to the Trayastrimsa Heaven to benefit his mother, Queen Maya, who died seven days after giving birth to him and had taken rebirth into that heaven.

As for when the latter took place, there are different claims. Some sources suggest that the Buddha’s ascendance to the Trayastrimsa Heaven took place seven years after his enlightenment. Yet this claim seems to be incompatible with the text here, which states that the Buddha’s teaching to her mother was near the time of his parinirvana. According to some Mahayana sutras such as the *Mahamaya Sutra*, the Buddha stayed three months at the Trayastrimsa

Heaven for a summer retreat, in order to benefit his mother and the celestial beings. Then after that, he returned to Jambudvīpa and soon afterward entered into parinirvana. This means that the teaching in the heaven took place at the later stage of the Buddha's life, which is consistent with the texts here.

Such being the case, a more logical conclusion is that after enlightenment, the Buddha first turned the Wheel of Dharma in the human world, and when that was nearly completed, he rose to the celestial realm to teach the Dharma to non-human beings.

This reminds me that the Festival of the Descent from Heaven is the last of the four major Buddhist festivals during the lunar year. The first is Chotrul Duchen, the Festival of Miracles, which commemorates the days when the Buddha displayed the miracle to subjugate tirthikas. It occurs on the full moon (the fifteenth day) of the first Tibetan month. The second is Saga Dawa Duchen, the Festival of Vaishakha, which celebrates Buddha Shakyamuni's achieving full enlightenment and entering parinirvana. Both occur on the same day of the full moon (the 15th day) of the fourth Tibetan lunar month. The third is Chokhor Duchen, the Festival of Turning the Wheel of Dharma, which occurs on the fourth day of the sixth Tibetan lunar month. The last is Lha Bab Duchen, the Festival of the Descent from Heaven, which marks the day when the Buddha returned to this human world after staying in the

celestial realm to benefit his mother and the gods. It occurs on the 22nd day of the ninth Tibetan month.

Following these four festivals, four great Dharma assemblies are held at Larung Gar every year. They are the Vidyadharas Dharma Assembly for magnetizing activities in the first Tibetan month, the Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly for purifying negativities in the fourth Tibetan month, the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly for accumulating great merit in the sixth Tibetan month, as well as the Amitabha Dharma Assembly for taking rebirth in the pure land in the ninth Tibetan month.

We can see from the text that when the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, he cared deeply about all the sentient beings of this degenerate age, both in the present and in the future. Like an old mother who is about to pass away worries about her children, the Buddha appeared to also have some concerns that needed to be addressed at his parinirvana. It was not about himself, but on how sentient beings would be cared for. In Dharmakshema's translation of *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it says,

The Tathagata suffers from hardships and he feels it not.

He looks upon the pains of beings as he does the pains of his own.

Since the Buddha has already annihilated suffering and its origin, he does not experience any affliction himself. However, when he sees the agony of sentient beings in the six samsaric realms, his universal compassion makes him feel their pain as if it is his own. All other buddhas and bodhisattvas are also the same. But unlike ordinary beings who are self-centered and constantly suffer from attachment to their own ego, the pain buddhas and bodhisattvas feel is never based on their concern for themselves.

During one of my trips, I was at a master's teaching and something he said really struck me and I could not agree with it more. He said that when a teacher was giving teachings and he frequently used the word "I", it meant that this teacher had a strong ego. Because how one talks is really determined by how one thinks. If someone always thinks of himself, it is a certainty that he would frequently use the word "I" in his speech.

A person with strong ego is filled with misery and that is what plagues most ordinary beings. The tears we shed, the sentiments we exude, and the agony we experience, are all rooted in self-centeredness. As ordinary beings, none of our afflictions originates from our consideration for others. But buddhas and bodhisattvas are completely different. What they cannot bear is the suffering of every sentient being. They feel acute pain for the plight of other sentient beings but they are not concerned with their own suffering,

even as agonizing as having their bodies being sliced up into pieces.
As stated in the *Introduction to the Middle Way*,

*Their foes may torture them, though they be innocent,
Dismembering their bodies piece by piece,
And cut their flesh and bones in lingering pain—
But this serves only to confirm their patience for their butchers.*

*For Bodhisattvas, those who see the absence of the self,
Agent, object, time, and manner of the wounds—
All things are like the image in a glass.
By understanding thus, all torments are endured.*

The Buddha felt relieved that Ksitigarbha was prepared to expound on the Mahayana teachings for present and future beings. This was because if the virtuous Dharma is taught to sentient beings, they would be able to rely on the Dharma to protect themselves from suffering, even after the Buddha himself has entered Parinirvana.

RECITING THE NAMES OF BUDDHAS

With the Buddha's permission and encouragement, Ksitigarbha began his teaching focused on the merit of the names of a number of buddhas. Although the Buddha did not appear to have praised Ksitigarbha at the end of this chapter, he had granted his permission and witnessed the entire teaching, indicating that what Ksitigarbha taught was free from any fault or deception.

Infinite Forms Tathagata

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, in the past, measureless asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Infinite Forms Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha's name and give rise to reverence momentarily, they will transcend forty kalpas of severe torments of samsara. How much more so when they sculpt and paint his image, make offerings, and sing his praises! These people will gain merit that is measureless and boundless.

From this passage, we can see the benefits of reciting “Namo Infinite Forms Tathagata”. In fact, every Tathagata’s name mentioned in this chapter is meritorious in this respect. I hope everyone will recite these buddhas’ names frequently. Even if one were to only generate reverence toward this buddha briefly, this merit would help a person transcend forty kalpas of severe torments of samsara. If one were to sculpt or paint the image of this tathagata, make offerings to him, and praise him, he or she will obtain limitless merit. I wonder how Infinite Forms Tathagata looks, since without careful observation, we would feel the appearances of many buddhas are quite similar.

Making images of buddhas can bring about immeasurable merit. In the *Exceptional Stories in Sutras and Vinaya Texts*, there is a story about a past life of Buddha Shakyamuni. Once upon a time, there was a great king who ruled 84,000 smaller countries. The king often made offerings to a buddha and his retinue. One day, the king thought to himself, “What a pity it is that people living in the small countries I rule are unable to accumulate merit by attending to the Buddha!” The king commanded artisans and painters to draw images of the Buddha and distributed them to the 84,000 countries for homage. Due to this commendable act, the king later became Buddha Shakyamuni and upon his parinirvana, his relics

were placed into 84,000 reliquary stupas in 84,000 different places worldwide for wide veneration.

Considering the benefit of buddha images, I feel strongly that buddha statues should be built in remote and underdeveloped places where even the names of buddhas have never been heard. I have been to Africa twice and was fortunate to meet a number of Han Chinese monks there. They have done many meritorious deeds in Africa, in particular erecting buddha statues. After seeing what they have done, it occurred to me that it would be good to spend my later years in Africa. There are 54 countries in Africa where most people have never heard the name of any buddha or bodhisattva, let alone seen their images. It is very sad that all sorts of disasters and sufferings continue to befall Africa. If more buddha statues and temples are built there, maybe their unfortunate destiny can be changed in due course.

I do not know how long I will live and as a monk, anywhere can be my home. It makes no difference whether I die in Africa, Europe, or America. I have a strong wish, though it is not yet a clear aspiration that as long as I can benefit the local beings even a little bit, I would like to stay there or even die there. That is what I am yearning for. If there is a chance in the future, I would really like to spend my last days in Africa and let the local people bury my body there. Perhaps they will not be bothered to bury my corpse, just leaving

it alone like what I saw with some of the dead inmates when I visited some of the prisons in Africa. That would also be fine with me.

The point is, we need to make aspirations to promote the Dharma in places where Buddhism is not flourishing. In the Han regions of today's China, it would seem that there are more Dharma masters in prosperous cities than in distant and economically backward places. I do not think that this is due to discrimination by eminent monks and great masters, but the karma of sentient beings at a given place can be a determinant factor. It is possible that beings in these poorer areas have created many seriously negative karma in the past that has led to their current retributions which deprive them of access to the Dharma or wealth and bring them frequent man-made or natural disasters. However, we should try all means to bring the Dharma to these areas to benefit living beings there. Remote places which have not heard buddhas' names deserve our special efforts. For Mahayana Buddhists, this is the foremost important thing that we need to always bear in mind.

Jewel Nature Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past, as many kalpas ago as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Nature Tathagata. If there are men and women

who hear this Buddha's name and, within the time of a finger snap, generate the mind to take refuge in him, these people will never fall back or turn away from the Unsurpassed Way.



In the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, Jewel Nature Tathagata is said to dwell in the world of Numerous Jewels, expounding the Dharma of Prajna to innumerable great bodhisattvas. If men or women hear this buddha's name and they think and aspire for even a fleeting moment that "This Jewel Nature Tathagata is remarkable and I want to take refuge in him!", they will never regress from the Mahayana path until ultimate enlightenment is attained. In addition, they will be perfectly endowed with prosperity and wealth in every lifetime henceforth.

In fact, if we were to take refuge in a buddha, no matter who he is, the merit and benefits are indeed boundless. The *Sutra of the Heart of the Sun* says,

*He who has made the Buddha his refuge
Cannot be killed by ten million demons;
Though he may transgress his vows or be tormented in mind,
It is certain that he will go beyond rebirth.*

This verse is also cited in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* to explain the immeasurable benefits of taking refuge. It points out that if we take refuge in the Buddha, even millions of mara and his retinues cannot harm us. And even if we break precepts or are distracted in our mind, we will definitely attain liberation. It is also said in the *Lotus Sutra*,

*Those who, even with distracted minds,
Entered a stupa compound
And chanted but once, "Homage to the Buddha!"
Have certainly attained the path of the buddhas.*

Although the full refuge in Buddhism is the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, even taking refuge in only one of them would give rise to immense merit and benefits.

Lotus Excellence Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Lotus Excellence Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, who have the sound pass through their ears, these people will be reborn a thousand times in the six heavens of the desire realm. How much more so when they recite and meditate on his name with a resolute mind!

According to Sanskrit, this buddha’s name means Red Lotus Excellence. The sutra says that as long as one simply hears his name then the name will enter one’s alaya consciousness and enable the person to take rebirth a thousand times in the six heavens of the desire realm. How much greater the benefit would be if we recite the name with sincere devotion! It would be extremely meaningful to us if we frequently recite “Namo Lotus Excellence Tathagata.”

The name of this buddha is also included in the *Sutra of the Buddha Speaks of Buddha Names*, a scripture translated during the Northern Wei Dynasty by Bodhiruci who is also known for having translated the *Dasabhumika Sutra (Ten Stages Sutra)* into Chinese. This sutra has twelve volumes and mentions about 11,093 buddha names, some of which are transliterated from Sanskrit while some are semantically translated. Many of the lands of the buddhas are also briefly mentioned in the text.

In Chinese Buddhist Canon, there are quite a few sutras that specifically mentioned buddha names. Han Chinese masters and translators must have attached great importance to names of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In comparison, scriptures mentioning buddha names are fewer in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. Among the few, one well-known scripture is *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri*. But the text does not mention many buddha names and just focuses on Manjushri's qualities and aims to help practitioners cultivate wisdom. While it is known as a sutra in the Chinese Tripitaka, it is actually categorized as a tantra in Kangyur.

Anyway, there are various scriptures on buddha names, like *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Present Fortunate Kalpa*, *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Past Vyuha Kalpa*, and *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Future Nakshatra Kalpa*. If you have time, you should look up these scriptures in the Tripitaka and recite the names of these buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although their names seem to be simple collections of a few words, they possess great blessing and can bring about great merit.

Lion's Roar Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past, inexpressibly-inexpressible asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Lion's Roar Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha's

name and in a thought take refuge in him, these people will meet measureless Buddhas who will place their hands on the crowns of their heads and give them prediction.



I have seen this buddha's name in quite a few sutras in both Tibetan and Chinese Tripitaka. For all men and women, not necessarily a virtuous man or woman, as it is not mentioned in the text, if they hear the name of this buddha and seek to take refuge in him, then innumerable buddhas will touch the crowns of their heads to give them blessings and the prophecy that predicts their future enlightenment. So, it is of great meaning to hear this buddha's name.

Krakucchanda Buddha

“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Krakucchanda Buddha. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, and with a resolute mind, they gaze reverently at and make obeisance to him, or they also sing his praises, these people will be great Brahma kings in the assemblies of the thousand Buddhas of the present kalpa and be given superior prediction.

Krakucchanda is the very first Buddha in the present Fortunate Kalpa and the fourth of the Seven Heroic Buddhas. The Seven Heroic Buddhas are Buddha Shakyamuni together with the six Buddhas who preceded him. According to certain historical records, this buddha made advent in the world when human’s lifespan was 40,000 years. Of course, there were different claims. A prerequisite for one to receive the blessing from this buddha, according to the text, is to have “a resolute mind”, that is, to be devout and sincere.

Vipasyin Buddha

“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Vipasyin [Buddha]. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will never fall into the lower realms and

will always be reborn among humans or devas and experience excellent, wonderful happiness.



Vipasyin Buddha was the first of the Seven Heroic Buddhas. Some texts say that he appeared in the world when human's lifespan was 80,000 years. If there are men or women who hear this buddha's name, those people will be forever prevented from falling into the lower realms, and always be born among humans or gods, enjoying supremely wonderful bliss.

That is the benefit of just hearing this buddha's name and does not require a person to generate faith and devotion. How convenient! On many occasions, whether our Dharma practice succeeds or

not depends on many factors including our sincerity. But once we hear the name of this buddha, we are already guaranteed against falling down, regardless of whether we have faith in him or understand the profound meaning of his name. The names of buddhas and bodhisattvas can carry such inconceivable blessing. Many scriptures, such as *The Sutra of Great Liberation* and *The Sutra of Golden Light*, point out that whoever hears the names of certain buddhas and bodhisattvas will no longer suffer in the three lower realms.

Jewel Excellence Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past, as many kalpas ago as there are grains of sand in measureless, countless Ganges Rivers, there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Excellence Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will never fall into the lower realms and will frequently be in the heavens and experience excellent, wonderful happiness.

Jewel Excellence Tathagata is the Buddha Ratnasikhin. Those who hear his name will not fall into the lower realms but always be born in the heavens and experience happiness. In *The Sutra of Golden Light*, there is a story that reflects the great merit of the name of Buddha Ratnasikhin. When Buddha Shakyamuni was teaching this sutra, ten thousand divine gods came to listen in front of the

Buddha. Through listening to the teaching, their minds were rid of shackles and obscurations. Seeing this, the Buddha gave them the prophecy of attaining buddhahood in the future. Then, a tree deity asked the Buddha what virtue the ten thousand gods had done that they could receive prophecy from the Buddha so easily, just after hearing a teaching.

The Buddha then told the following story. In the past, there was a man called Jalavahana. As the son of a medical man, Jalavahana compassionately healed everyone in his country from illness and thus earned everyone's respect. One day he came to a forest and saw a great pool where there lived ten thousand fish. For some reason, the pool was almost dry and the ten thousand fish were dying. Full of compassion, he worked to fetch enough water to fill the pool and to save those fish. Not only that, he also brought food to satisfy them.

It occurred to him that he had heard at a forest retreat a monk recite the Mahayana sutras, which said, "Whoever should at the time of death hear the name of Tathagata Ratnasikhin will be reborn in the blissful world of heaven." He decided to introduce to the fish the profound law of dependent arising. Then, he went into the pool and chanted the name of Tathagata Ratnasikhin and expounded the Dharma to the fish. Later, when the fish in the pool died, they were reborn as gods in the Trayastrimsa Heaven.

The Buddha told the tree deity that Jalavahana are now the Buddha himself and the ten thousand fish are now the ten thousand divine gods. It was all because they had heard the Dharma and the name of Ratnasikhin from Jalavahana in the past that now they can receive such a prophecy from the Buddha in this life. That is the benefit of hearing the name of Buddha Ratnasikhin. If we chant this name to other sentient beings, especially animals, these beings will never fall into the lower realms. It is therefore of great importance to let others hear the name of this buddha.

From time to time, people will ask me to guide across the deceased. At times, they would like me to perform the ritual of phowa. While phowa is beneficial, it requires the performer to have attained a high level of spiritual realization and not everyone is capable of doing this. Comparatively, reciting buddha names is much easier for everyone. Therefore, I would often recite the buddha names that I am familiar with, particularly Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Buddha Ratnasikhin for deceased humans or animals. If I have time, I will also recite the names of the Seven Medicine Buddhas and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas. As Buddhists, whenever we encounter sentient beings who are dying or in a critical condition, please chant some buddha names with a kind heart for them to hear, regardless of whether you are asked or not. This will most certainly be beneficial to them.

Buddha names are all endowed with inconceivable blessing and definitely bring great benefits, regardless of who chant them. It is like medicine. As long as it is properly made or manufactured, it works for its corresponding disease. If you get an illness whose antidote is this medicine, then as long as you take it, you will get better and it does not matter who brings you this medicine, either a doctor or a nurse. The same for buddha names. Anyone can benefit from hearing a buddha name and it does not matter who makes them hear it. Moreover, unlike worldly drugs, buddha names are sublime medicine that causes no side effects to any being.

However, to generate such a conviction, we Buddhists must first understand the superiority of buddha names. Be aware that all buddhas have perfected their accumulation of wisdom and merit through hundreds of thousands of eons of spiritual practice. Because of that, after they attain buddhahood, their names carry inconceivable power and blessing that an ordinary being's name cannot possibly provide.

Personally, I believe even the names of great masters, like our root guru H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, are exceptional. Even though His Holiness passed into nirvana, as long as his name exists in the world, whoever calls or hears his name will have the root of virtue planted in their alaya consciousnesses. For example, every day we recite the supplication prayer of His Holiness,

*In the pure realm of the great sacred site, the Five-Peaked Mountain,
The blessings of Manjushri's wisdom ripened in your mind—
Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!
Inspire me with your blessings: transmit the realization of
the wisdom-mind lineage!*

By calling out the name of His Holiness and praying to him, we can be inspired by his supreme blessing. This name is certainly different from any random worldly name. Because of this extraordinary feature, in the Tibetan tradition, after a guru has passed into nirvana, it is difficult and also inappropriate for disciples to call out his name directly during conversations. In the occasion where disciples have to speak out the name of their passed guru, they will add an honorific before the guru's name. For example, when mentioning our guru, we may say "The One Whose Name Is Unspeakable but Should Nonetheless Be Spoken under This Special Occasion, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche."

Of course, for those who have no faith, it would be difficult for them to believe the extraordinariness of these noble names. Even though we have talked about the amazing qualities of many buddha names in this chapter, they would not be impressed. When speaking of the names of some great masters, they would not be inspired either. Just as *The Buddha Speaks of the Mahayana Ten Dharmas Sutra* says,

*A man who has no faith
Will not give birth to pure virtues,
Just like scorched seeds
Do not take root and germinate.*

People who do not have faith cannot engage in virtues or generate merit, just like a fully burnt seed cannot germinate and grow into a green plant.

This reminds me of the poor, withered plants and flowers that we bought for landscaping at Larung Gar. Recently, our academy has invested a lot of money in landscaping. We have bought a considerable number of flowers and plants. But it would appear that our groundskeeping team has not managed the plantings appropriately. The flowers are left uncared for on the roadside without being watered. As I went to the Mandala earlier today, I saw that the flowers were dried and almost withered, no longer green and fresh. A team should have been assigned for the care of the flowers. It is unclear to me why the beautiful flowers were left unattended. What was the team doing? This irresponsible act is no different from the “scorched seeds” that “do not take root and germinate”.

Whatever we do, we should do it well from start to finish. That is just as true in the volunteer service we provide. Some people are

notably enthusiastic when they first start volunteering but they do not finish well. Detail is the key to success. If long-term motivation and attention to detail are lacking, a whirl of whim is meaningless as it does not lead to a sustainable effort.

Jewel Sign Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Sign Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name and give rise to a reverent mind, these people will attain arhatship before long.



In the *Sutra of the Buddha’s Words of Teaching*, a buddha named Jewel Sign is also mentioned. I am not certain that he is the same

as the one mentioned here in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. According to that sutra, Buddha Shakyamuni once was expounding the merit of virtuous teachers in the celestial realm. The audience was deeply touched and realized that if they had not been cared for by virtuous teachers in their past lives, they would not have encountered the Buddha and heard the profound Dharma in this life. However, knowing that they had not been able to repay their teachers' great kindness, they began to cry. The Buddha then sighed with great compassion toward them, shaking the whole world and all the buddha fields in the process.

Across billions of worlds to the east of the saha world, there is a world called Jeweled Land where Buddha Jewel Sign resides. Besides the Buddha, there is a bodhisattva called Adornment of Pervasive Radiance. At that time, this bodhisattva asked Buddha Jewel Sign what made the world shake. Buddha Jewel Sign said that it was because Buddha Shakyamuni in the saha world was explaining the kindness of virtuous teachers. Then Bodhisattva Adornment of Pervasive Radiance expressed his wish to listen to the teachings in person in front of Buddha Shakyamuni. With the encouragement of Buddha Jewel Sign as well as his miraculous power, the bodhisattva left his world and in a moment arrived at the place of Buddha Shakyamuni. Upon the request of the bodhisattva,

Buddha Shakyamuni give him the teaching on how to follow and attend to virtuous teachers.

Kasaya Banner Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past, measureless asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Kasaya Banner Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will transcend a hundred great kalpas of torments of samsara.

This buddha’s name appears many times in the *Liturgy of Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance*, a liturgy for confession in Han Buddhism composed by the Imperial Master Wuda. The master compiled this liturgy for his own daily repentance, which then became a popular practice of confession. Here is the story of the origin of this liturgy:

In a previous life during the Western Han Dynasty, Master Wuda was a minister called Yuan Ang. In that life, he successfully persuaded the emperor to execute another minister named Zhao Cuo by cutting him in half at the waist. For ten lives since then, the spirit of the man Zhao Cuo had been seeking revenge on Yuan Ang but found no opportunity, because Yuan Ang had always been an excellent monk who preserved pure precepts. In this life, when

Wuda became the imperial master and gave rise to one arrogant thought, the spirit exploited the chance and appeared at his knee as a human-faced sore, which had eyebrows, eyes, a mouth, and teeth. It even demanded to be fed with drink and food.

Master Wuda sought help from many well-known doctors, but none could treat him successfully. Then the master thought about the words of a monk whom he used to help. In the past, Master Wuda encountered a monk who suffered from illness, he then took care of the monk until he recovered. Out of gratitude, the monk told him that if he ever met any problem, he could come to Jiulong Mountain to find him for help. Then Master Wuda came to Jiulong Mountain and found the monk, who then instructed him to wash the sore at the spring there. As Master Wuda was about to rinse the sore, it started to speak and told the master his grievance and their story in a previous life. Then, by the power of the Dharma water of samadhi, the spirit let go of his grudge and the master recovered. Thereafter, Master Wuda compiled the *Liturgy of Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance* and chanted it every day to confess his wrongdoings. The special monk, by the way, was the manifestation of one of the Sixteen Great Arhats, the noble elder Kanakavatsa.

In Master Wuda's liturgy for repentance, we can see many times of "Namo Buddha Kasaya Banner". This buddha is indeed powerful

for purifying negative karma, and just hearing his name will eradicate the torments of samsara in a hundred great kalpas.

Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata

“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, these people will meet as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, who will extensively expound the Dharma for them, and they will certainly attain bodhi.



The sutra then describes a buddha named Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata. If men or women hear this buddha’s name,

they will encounter as many buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, all of whom will explain the Dharma to them in detail and help them realize ultimate enlightenment.

We have now reviewed the names of the ten Tathagatas. Considering the remarkable blessing of these buddha names, I hope you will write them down and put them in your daily chant book. Add “Namo” before each name and chant them frequently. Some love the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and keep reciting it on a daily basis, which is very good. But for many, they may not have time to recite this entire sutra every day, not even just this chapter. If that is the case, you can recite the names of these buddhas instead, which will not take too much time but will bring immense benefits.

Names of More Buddhas

“Moreover, in the past, there was Pure Moon Buddha, Mountain King Buddha, Wisdom Excellence Buddha, Pure Name King Buddha, Wisdom Accomplished Buddha, Unsurpassed Buddha, Wonderful Sound Buddha, Full Moon Buddha, and Moon-Countenance Buddha—there were inexpressibly [many] Buddhas such as these.



Here, Ksitigarbha listed more buddhas. Even though Ksitigarbha didn't specify their meritorious qualities, be aware that if we recite any of these names and supplicate to them, the merit will be inconceivable.

BENEFIT OF RECITING BUDDHA NAMES

“World-Honored One, all living beings in the present and future—be they devas or humans, men or women—as long as they remember a Buddha’s name, they will attain measureless virtues. How much more so when they remember many [Buddhas’] names! These beings will gain great benefits at the time of birth and the time of death, and they will never fall into the lower realms.

After I have translated *A Garland of Jewels: Names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*, my hope is that more and more people will recite the names of those noble figures frequently. For a time, practitioners here in Larung Gar chanted that text on a regular basis and they persisted for quite a while. I believe many of them are still following this practice because I know some practitioners have included the names of many buddhas and bodhisattvas in their

daily chanting and have been carrying on the recitation every day without interruption.

“If a person is on the verge of death and his family members, even just one of them, recite a Buddha’s name clearly for the sick one’s sake, with the exception of the five great violations that lead to incessant torments, the ripened effects of the dying person’s other karma will be dissolved. The five great violations that lead to incessant torments are so extremely grave that the offender would pass through millions of kalpas without release. [...]



When someone is near death, if his family members, even if it is just one person, chant just the name of one buddha, like “Namo Amitabha”, “Namo Buddha Shakyamuni”, “Namo Tathagata Ratnasikhin”, then except for the five crimes with immediate retribution, all other karmic retributions of this dying person will dissolve. Because these five crimes are extremely grave, those who commit them will stay in the hell and other lower realms for millions of eons without release. This is certainly a terrifying consequence.

Even though the five great crimes are severe, it is not unresolvable. As it is said in *The King of Aspiration Prayers*,

*All negative acts—even the five of immediate retribution—
Whatever they have committed in the grip of ignorance,
Will soon be completely purified,
If they recite this Aspiration to Good Actions.*

We now recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* as our daily practice so that even if we had committed one or more of the five crimes of immediate retribution as a result of our ignorance, thanks to the power of this recitation, this grave negative karma can promptly melt away.

The merit of *The King of Aspiration Prayers* is indeed unbelievable. I remember when His Holiness was alive, quite a few times after

his teaching, Khenpo Gardo asked His Holiness, “Is *The King of Aspiration Prayers* that auspicious and beneficial? Will it be that simple that just through reciting it, even the five grave crimes would be purified?” His Holiness replied, “Yes, this stanza here does not mention any other requirement like visualizations. According to it, you simply need to recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* and by virtue of its recitation, these negativities can be completely purified. Does this mean that people would be free to commit misdeeds any time they want? Not really. Wise people are remorseful of their wrongdoings and they will resolve not to repeat their negative actions. That is, they possess the four powers of purifying their negativities.”

While chanting *The King of Aspiration Prayers* or reciting certain mantras can dissolve the negativities of the five grave crimes, it is essential to also apply the four powers of purification, otherwise such grave negative karma can still be a big obstacle for taking rebirth in Sukhavati. In addition to the five grave crimes, there could also be numerous negative deeds we have committed in this life or past lives that would violate the Mahayana vows or the Vajrayana vows. In this very short life, since we are fortunate enough to have encountered so many powerful methods of purification, we should exert ourselves in these practices in order to attain a pure life and a

pure rebirth. Diligent practice is indispensable to make this human existence meaningful and to stop the wheel of samsara.

“[...] Nevertheless, by virtue of other people reciting and meditating on the names of Buddhas for his sake when he is on the verge of death, [even the torments from] such offenses can be gradually dissolved, too. How much more so when living beings themselves recite and meditate on [the names of Buddhas]! They will gain measureless merit and dissolve measureless [torments of] offenses.”

Even if the dying person has committed the five grave crimes, if one recites buddha names to him, be it Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, or others, by the power of that recitation, his karmic retribution, however grave they may be, can be gradually dissolved. If this even works indirectly, imagine how much more meritorious it would be if people actually recite the buddha names themselves, and how much more effective it would be for their negative karma to be broadly eliminated.

Therefore, we should aspire to always chant *The King of Aspiration Prayers* and recite the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas to help eliminate all the negative karma stored in our alaya consciousness, and to be reborn in the blissful land of Sukhavati.

We have now completed the ninth chapter. My hope is that we can finish the teaching of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* this year as well. It is a great accomplishment for all of you to be able to study this entire sutra in depth. Likewise, I feel satisfied and relieved that I was able to give you this teaching. I hope that whenever you attend a Mahayana teaching such as this that you will be attentive and embrace it with faith, making it meaningful for both the teacher and the audience.

Dedication

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

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

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