

**HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS  
TO THE SIXTEEN ELDERS**

**Lecture One**

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# INTRODUCTION

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

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

## Origin of the Teaching

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

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

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

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

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

## **Significance of the Prayer**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Understanding the Arhats Properly

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

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

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

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



# BACKGROUND TO THE PRAYER

## The Title and the Author

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

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

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

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

## History of the Arhats

### 1 The Sixteen and Eighteen Arhats

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

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

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

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

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

## **2 The Five Hundred Arhats**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## KEEPING AN OPEN AND PURE MIND

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

### Arhats Are Supreme Objects of Homage

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

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

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

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

## **The Arhats Can Appear in Different Forms**

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



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

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

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

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

## Understanding the Stories of the Arhats Correctly

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



**Buddha Shakyamuni**

# BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

## THE INCOMPARABLE ONE

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

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

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

## **The Matchlessness of the Buddha**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Paying Attention to Our Conduct**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Praying for Great Masters and the Dharma**

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

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

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

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

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

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



**Elder Angaja**

# ANGAJA

## THE FIRST ELDER

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



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

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

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

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

## **Atisha and the Sixteen Arhats**

### **1 Sixteen Honorable Guests**

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

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

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

## **2 Encounters with Angaja**

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

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

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

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

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

## Khenpo Chopa's Misadventures at Mount Kailash

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The One Born in Fire

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

### 1 The Buddha’s Prophecies about Angaja

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## **2 Birth in the Charnel Ground**

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

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

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

### **3 Renouncing His Wealth and Seeking Ordination**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **4 Why Was Angaja Born in Fire**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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