

**HOMAGE AND OFFERINGS
TO THE SIXTEEN ELDERS**

Lecture Six

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Elder Nagasena

NAGASENA

THE FOURTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Nagasena,
Who dwells on the slopes of Mount Meru,
Surrounded by one thousand two hundred arhats,
And holds a vase and monk's staff:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Let's continue with our study of this prayer. Mainly, it comprises of verses of praise for each of the sixteen principal arhats. We have now reached the fourteenth elder.

We pay homage to the noble elder Nagasena, or Lu'i De as he is known in Tibetan. The name means, "Army of Nagas" or "Host of Dragons". Nagasena dwells on the slopes of Mount Meru, surrounded by 1,200 arhats. He holds a monk's staff in one hand and a golden vase in the other. There are bells on the staff which, as they ring, awaken beings from ignorance. The golden vase contains nectar that can wash away the pain and afflictions that torment beings. We pray to the elder Nagasena for his blessing so that all great teachers may live long and always turn the Wheel of Dharma, and the teachings of the Mahayana and Theravada Vehicles, and of the Sutrayana and Vajrayana, may remain long in this world for the benefit of sentient beings.

Accounts vary concerning the exact abode of Nagasena, depending on the text. In the *Nandimitravadana*, Nagasena is said to dwell on the mountain of Mount Pandava. In other sources, Nagasena is said to reside on Mount Vipularshva. In Tibetan, this mountain is called "gos-yatjs", which is the highest of the five mountains that surround Rajagriha. According to Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Nagasena dwells on a mountain called Mount Urumunda.

The Life Story of Nagasena

Nagasena was born into the royal family of a North Indian kingdom. As prince of his kingdom, he was destined to become king but, having witnessed the immense suffering caused by war, taxation, hard labor, and so on, he was repelled by worldly life and all its mundane concerns. He realized that if he ascended the throne, his entire life would be occupied by these meaningless activities. Therefore, he renounced his claim to the throne, went to see Buddha Shakyamuni, and requested to become a monk.

According to some historical sources, Buddha Shakyamuni was 55 years old when he received Nagasena and granted him ordination. After becoming a monk, Nagasena studied the Tripitaka assiduously and soon attained arhathood. To repay the Buddha's great kindness in guiding him to enlightenment, Nagasena went to the Heaven of the Four Great Kings to teach the Dharma to the devas.

Among the Buddha's disciples, Nagasena is praised as being the foremost exemplar of non-attachment. Although many of the Buddha's disciples were strong renunciants, Nagasena was the most renowned for giving up his royal title and all the privileges associated with it.

People today are often surprised when promising young students who graduate from prestigious universities like Tsinghua University or Peking University in China, give up their careers to join the monastic sangha. But honestly speaking, this isn't shocking at all. Throughout Buddhist history, there have been many monks who were princes before they joined the sangha. So it's hardly surprising if a person who is neither royalty nor from a national leader's family decides to take ordination.

The Supreme Way to Repay the Buddha's Kindness

There are two inspirations we can take from the story of Nagasena. Firstly, the greatest benefit that we can gain from the Dharma is nothing other than enlightenment itself, since only enlightenment can lead us to ultimate happiness. Once I asked someone whether he was the happiest person in the world and he said that absolutely he was not because he hadn't yet attained enlightenment. I couldn't agree more with what he said—enlightened beings are the happiest of all. There is a book called, *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret & Science of Happiness* written by Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. In the introduction to the book, the publishers present Rinpoche as being the happiest man in the world. If this is the case, he must be a highly realized master, as there's nothing in our mundane world that can approach this ultimate state of happiness.

The only stable and secure happiness we can attain is the joy of enlightenment. If we achieve enlightenment, we will experience unchanging joy. The happiness of ordinary people who lack enlightened wisdom is, on the other hand, transient and changeable. They might be happy one day with everything that they have, such as their wealth and status, but easily become unhappy the next day. Money doesn't bring true happiness, nor does high social status, nor a nice family. These things can only bring a state of transient happiness which can easily change into a negative experience. Therefore, the most meaningful thing we can do with our life is to seek enlightenment, which brings about ultimate happiness.

Another inspiration we can draw from Nagasena's life story is that the best and the only way to repay the Buddha's kindness is to teach the Dharma and guide others onto the path of awakening. Anyone who has achieved enlightenment through practicing the Dharma will willingly repay the Buddha's kindness by inspiring others onto the path of Dharma.

As practitioners who have not yet reached enlightenment, if we wish to repay our teacher's kindness for the benefit we have received from the Dharma, we can offer them material goods or serve them with our body and speech. This will certainly please them. However, the best way we can repay their kindness is to practice the teachings according to their instructions and to strive

to benefit beings. Whether your teachers or your Dharma friends notice or not, your effort in this direction will be the best way to express your gratitude.



Elder Gopaka

GOPAKA

THE FIFTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble elder Gopaka,
Who dwells on Vihula, king of mountains,
Surrounded by one thousand four hundred arhats,
And holds a text in his two hands:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

The fifteenth elder is called Gopaka, or Bechepa in Tibetan. He is also called “The Concealed One” since, according to some sources, his name in Sanskrit means “to be concealed” or “to be covered”. The elder Gopaka dwells on Vihula, king of mountains, where 1,400 arhats surround him. In the *Nandimitravadana*, Gopaka is said to reside on Gandhamadana with 900 arhats as his retinue. He holds a Dharma text in both his hands. We pray to Gopaka with the aspiration that the long life of all great teachers may remain indestructible, like a vajra mountain, and that the wish-fulfilling Dharma, the source of peace and happiness, will spread widely and unceasingly throughout the three worlds.

The Concealed One

The life story of this elder is mainly recorded in *The Hundred Deeds* and the *Avadanasataka*, which respectively appear in the Tibetan Tripitaka and the Chinese Tripitaka. In *The Hundred Deeds*, his story is entitled, “The Story of Deluded”. The storyline is mostly consistent with what we find in the *Avadanasataka*, except that at the end, Gopaka is said to have been killed after being kicked by a dairy cow. Based on the prayer that we are studying, we know that Gopaka vowed in the presence of the Buddha to remain in this world in order to protect and uphold the Dharma. In this respect, the account in *The Hundred Deeds* appears to be at odds with that commitment. In the *Avadanasataka*, the story has a different ending

which I think better matches what is stated in the prayer. So I will briefly talk about his life story based on the Chinese version.

Gopaka had an unusual birth under difficult circumstances. He was born into a wealthy householder's family but from the moment he was born, his body was covered in boils. This is like cases we may hear about or see on TV of people who are born with all types of physical defects, such as hypoplastic limbs. As Gopaka grew up, the boils developed into a mass of sores that covered his entire body, oozing blood and pus. It was unbearable to look at.

Unable to watch him suffer, Gopaka's parents sought out many different doctors and treatments in order to cure him, but all to no avail. In *The Hundred Deeds*, it says that his parents could not bear to see his worsening condition, so they covered his body with fragrant water and clothes. Probably his parents did this because they didn't want to expose the unsightliness and stench of his body to other people. Because of this, he became known as "The Concealed One" or "The Covered One".

Years later, as Gopaka grew up, he still could find no cure. Some people who were aware of his condition suggested that he go to see Buddha Shakyamuni, since the Buddha was renowned as being the "Great Healer of All Diseases". Gopaka went to see the Buddha as suggested. The Buddha then spoke to him of the

suffering that arises from the five aggregates. Upon hearing this teaching, Gopaka expressed deep remorse and confessed all his negative karma. No sooner had he made his confession than all the sores on his body completely disappeared. Gopaka was overjoyed and requested the monk's vows from the Buddha. After taking ordination, he practiced the teachings diligently and with the ripening of causes and conditions cultivated in past lives, swiftly attained arhathood.

As we can see from this story, the Buddha was not only the supreme healer of the mind, he was also an extraordinary physician capable of curing many rare illnesses. People who suffer from rare diseases that cannot be cured by conventional means can still be treated by the extraordinary remedy of the Buddha's blessing and his many skillful means. The many accounts that appear in the Vinaya texts bear testimony to this. Actually, the Buddha was not only a supreme healer for the people of his time, he is still a supreme healer and his teachings can offer a cure for even the worst mental afflictions and physical illnesses that we suffer from today.

Two Wealthy Elders

Other disciples asked the Buddha what karma Gopaka had created in his past lives that caused him to be born with a body full of

sores? And how was it possible that he attained arhathood so quickly? The Buddha replied as follows.

Long ago, two wealthy elders endured a hostile relationship with each other. One of them won the favor of the king by making offerings of great riches to him. This elder then accused the other of plotting against him. With the permission of the king, he viciously lashed the other elder and sprinkled poison over his wounds. This caused the elder who was victim to this false accusation and terrible attack to develop a deep revulsion toward worldly life and samsara. He gave away all his wealth and went to live in a forest, meditating alone there. Since he practiced without the guidance of a teacher, he gained the accomplishment of a solitary realizer.

He then reflected how being wrongly accused and physically assaulted had actually been a positive circumstance for him, since it had helped him to attain his realization. In order to repay the huge kindness of his assailant, the solitary realizer decided to help him avoid the karmic retribution that would inevitably result from his terrible actions. Therefore, he displayed miraculous powers to the elder who then developed great faith in him and confessed all his wrongdoings.

To avoid the karmic consequences of having harmed his rival, the elder engaged in all kinds of virtuous activities directed towards

the solitary realizer, dedicating them accordingly. However, his negative karma was not completely purified and he still had to undergo many physical hardships in his subsequent lifetimes. In his last rebirth, he still suffered from severe illness due to this karma.

The first elder was reborn as Gopaka in this, his last life. By “last rebirth”, we mean the final rebirth in samsara. Beings in their last rebirth transcend samsara and are no longer bound by suffering since they attain liberation within that lifetime. Even though Gopaka was in his last rebirth, he still could not escape the results of his previous negative karma.

How then did Gopaka attain arhathood so swiftly? In *The Hundred Deeds*, it says that during the time of Buddha Kashyapa, he was a monk who observed his precepts very purely throughout his entire life. The positive karma of his pure conduct ripened in his last life, such that Gopaka was able to renounce his worldly life quite easily and attain arhathood within a short time.

Gopaka was also able to reach fruition so quickly because of the times that he lived in. As we know, the Buddha’s teaching is divided into four periods regarding the extent to which the Dharma survives. They are the fruition period, the accomplishment period, the transmission period, and the period when only symbols remain.

The time when the Buddha was present is called the fruition period since practitioners attained fruition very quickly. This also explains why Gopaka became an arhat in such a short space of time.

As we can see from Gopaka's life story, unfavorable circumstances can be an incentive for us to follow the spiritual path and reach attainment. This is borne out by many of the stories contained in *The Hundred Deeds*. Some Dharma practitioners may have similar experiences as well. Having gone through certain challenges, such as being treated unjustly, feeling abandoned, or experiencing trauma from different life events, they sought solace from the teachings and finally found the right path in Buddhism. In such instances, as Venerable Longchenpa said in *The Precious Treasury of Pith Instructions*, we should see those adverse circumstances and obstacles as incentives to our spiritual path. We can be grateful to anyone who caused us obstacles, of any kind, since this became the positive inducement that led us onto the path of Dharma.

Our Connection to Buddha Shakyamuni and His Retinue

In summary, the Buddha instructed that after his passing, Gopaka should dwell on Mount Vihula to preserve and uphold the Dharma in the world. As followers of the Buddha, if we supplicate the elder Gopaka, he will definitely fulfill his promise to maintain and

protect the Dharma. The prosperity of the Dharma is dependent on the blessings of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats and devas, so it is very important for us to continuously supplicate them.

In particular, as his followers, we share a very special connection with Buddha Shakyamuni and his teaching. Therefore, if we pray to him, we will receive extraordinary blessings. As it is recounted in *The White Lotus: An Extensive Biography of the Lives of Buddha Shakyamuni*, even though we will certainly receive blessings and accumulate merit by praying to other tathagatas, since Buddha Shakyamuni vowed specifically to care for and enlighten beings of this world, we share an exclusive connection with him, and will therefore receive swifter blessings when we pray to him.

Besides praying to Buddha Shakyamuni, it is equally important to pray to his close disciples. Among the retinue of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Eight Great Bodhisattvas are the Buddha's primary regents, his close sons, according to the Great Vehicle. If we pray to the Eight Great Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya, and Manjushri, through their blessing, all the qualities that we aspire towards on the Mahayana path, such as bodhicitta and non-dual wisdom, will easily arise in our minds. If we wish to attain the qualities emphasized in the Lesser Vehicle, such as renunciation, non-attachment, and so on, we should invoke the noble arhats.

Through their blessing, these qualities will more easily arise in our minds.

This is similar to the way that we normally form bonds in our life. A guru and his students, for example, share a very special bond because of the relationship of direct transmission. Many students have such a special connection with a teacher. In the same way, followers of Buddha Shakyamuni share a close karmic connection with him and his retinue. Thus, it is crucial for us to pray to the Buddha and his disciples, particularly the Sixteen Arhats and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas.

That is why in almost every Tibetan monastery, in addition to the central place given to Buddha Shakyamuni, we will also find images of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and the Sixteen Arhats. There is nothing random or haphazard about the images that we see inside a Buddhist temple. They are there for a reason. The Four Great Kings are also often depicted at the entrance to a monastery, since they also play an important role in safeguarding the Dharma. We will cover them in a later verse.



Elder Abhedya

ABHEDYA

THE SIXTEENTH ELDER

**We pay homage to the noble elder Abhedya,
Who dwells among the king-like Snowy Peaks,
Surrounded by a thousand arhats,
And holds an enlightenment stupa:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!**

The last elder that we pay homage to is Abhedya, or Michepa in Tibetan. 'Mi' in Tibetan grammar is a form of negation just as 'a' is a negation in Sanskrit. Thus his name means, "The Indestructible" or "The Unparalleled". Abhedya received this name because he was unparalleled in wisdom, discipline, compassion, and many other enlightened qualities. When I searched for the name Abhedya in the Chinese sutras, I found only a few results. Later, however, I found mention of him in the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, but under another Sanskrit name, Pilindavatsa. This name appears more frequently in the Chinese sutras.

Abhedya dwells among the king-like Snowy Peaks of the Tibetan regions. I guess, therefore, that Tibetan masters can seek him out if they find it difficult to see the other elders. The location could be somewhere around Mount Kailash since it is well known that many arhats reside there. As many Nepalese troops guard the border in that area, I imagine they must receive lots of blessings! Abhedya is encircled by 1,000 arhats and holds an enlightenment stupa in his hands. Sometimes the arhats vary in their appearance in the Han and Tibetan traditions, for example in terms of the symbols that they hold, but in this case he appears identically in both. We pray that through his blessings, the teachers may live long and the Dharma may prosper.

One Who Practices Compassion on Seeing Suffering

The elder Abhedya is quite a distinguished figure. He was born into a Brahmin family in India and was an exceptionally refined child. As he grew older, he took great joy in performing acts of generosity. Eventually, he grew weary of worldly life and requested ordination when he met the Buddha. After becoming a monk, he delved deep into the Tripitaka, practiced accordingly, and finally attained arhathood.

A striking attribute of Abhedya is his strong compassion. In some sutras, he is said to be “foremost in compassion”, and the Buddha praised him as “One Who Practices Compassion on Seeing Suffering”. Generally speaking, as stated in the *Digha Nikaya*, bhikkhus are prohibited from talking about or displaying their supernatural powers and instead should conceal them. Nonetheless, when moved by compassion, Abhedya did use his miraculous powers on certain occasions, but each time he was later excused by the Buddha.

1 Saving His Nephew

In the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, there is a story of how Abhedya used his powers to help his nephew. His nephew was originally a

non-Buddhist. Later, through Abhedya's persuasion, his brother-in-law agreed to allow his son to follow the Buddha and study the Dharma. Abhedya decided to teach his nephew in person, so the boy made his way to the vihara where Abhedya was staying. On the way there, however, the nephew was abducted by bandits, and this news reached Abhedya from a deva who had observed this. After careful consideration, Abhedya decided to rescue his nephew by using his miraculous powers.

Other bhikkhus learned about this incident and reported it to the Buddha. The Buddha then asked Abhedya why he had used his miraculous powers—was it because his relatives were involved, or for other reasons? Abhedya denied that it was for any personal reasons or favor. He explained his intent as follows, "If I hadn't used my supernatural power to save my nephew, a family would fall apart, the non-Buddhists would take delight in the tragedy, and many Buddhists would be discouraged from coming to the vihara." After examining his motives, the omniscient Buddha excused him.

2 Helping a Poor Girl and Her Mother

Another example comes from the *Pancavargika* (*Five Part Vinaya*) which recounts the story of how Abhedya helped a destitute young girl. Once, Abhedya encountered a young girl in a village who was

extremely distressed. From the girl's mother, Abhedya learned that the village was holding a special event that day and everyone was getting dressed up in their best clothes to attend. The girl, however, came from an impoverished family and couldn't afford any fine clothes to wear, therefore she was very sad and kept crying. Out of compassion for the distraught girl, Abhedya used his supernatural power to turn pieces of grass into stunning pieces of jewelry made of finest gold that she could wear.

The girl went to the event beautifully adorned in these dazzling pieces of jewelry. Everyone who saw her was struck at how stunning she looked and, out of jealousy, reported to the king about the jewelry that she was wearing. The king himself had never seen such exquisite gold and had nothing to equal it in his own palace, so he summoned the girl's mother and asked whether she had acquired some riches that she was keeping secret from him? The mother denied having any hidden treasure and told the king it was because Abhedya had used his special powers to turn ordinary grass into purest gold. Thinking that she was lying, the king became extremely angry and threw her into prison.

When Abhedya came to the village for a second time, he saw that the girl was crying once more and asked her what the reason was. The girl told Abhedya how her mother had come to be imprisoned because of the gold jewelry that she had worn that day. Abhedya

promised the girl that he would rescue her mother and headed straight to the prison. There, the warden told him that he needed permission from the king first, before he could release the girl's mother. So Abhedya flew to the king's palace and asked the king to immediately set the girl's mother free.

The king said to Abhedya that this woman had discovered a treasure of great value but had kept it for herself without offering any to him. Abhedya then told him that there wasn't any treasure—he had created these stunning pieces of gold jewelry from ordinary grass. To convince the king, Abhedya took a stick and struck a pillar in his palace to show how he could transform ordinary objects into pure gold. As he struck the pillar, the entire building was transformed into a resplendent golden palace. Witnessing this miracle, the king was convinced of his power and immediately gave the order to release the mother. People who saw and heard about this miraculous display developed strong faith in the Dharma.

3 Saving the Sangha's Property

On another occasion, the sangha had just finished their summer retreat in Rajagriha. The place where they were staying became filled with food and other provisions offered by their followers—hence it became the target of bandits. One night, a group of bandits broke into their residence and bundled up all the goods. As they were

attempting their getaway, a deva alerted Abhedya to what was going on. Abhedya used his miraculous power to surround the residence with an iron wall. When the bandits tried to leave with their haul, they came up against the wall which blocked their way. When they dropped the goods, the wall completely disappeared. They made seven attempts to leave and at last gave up and ran away empty-handed.

Other bhikkhus heard about this incident and reported it to the Buddha, saying “Abhedya used his supernatural powers again!” The Buddha then spoke to Abhedya and learned that he had done so with the sole intention of protecting the sangha’s property. Therefore, the Buddha did not reprimand him. Abhedya seemed to be excused quite often like that!

One with a Strong Habit of Arrogance

There is another interesting aspect to the elder Abhedya. Abhedya had a strong karmic habit of arrogance resulting from his taking rebirth as a brahmin for 500 lives. As you know, the caste system in India is comprised of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, the last being the lowest laborers. Abhedya often addressed others as “Shudra” due to this habitual tendency. Whether it was an ordinary woman or a king, Abhedya could not help but call them Shudra. Despite the fact he was an arhat and had cut through his

afflictive emotions, he still continued this habit and managed to offend quite a lot of people. Even when apologizing for having addressed somebody as Shudra, he still called them Shudra!

The following story is recorded in the Buddhist texts. Abhedya would often cross the River Ganges in order to beg for food. Each time that he wanted to cross the river, he would snap his fingers and say to the goddess of the river, "Shudra, stop the river!" The river would then cease to flow and a pathway would appear in the middle that he could walk across. Finally, one day, the river goddess became fed up with his arrogance and complained about him to the Buddha. The Buddha told Abhedya to apologize to the goddess. Abhedya folded his palms together and said to her, "I'm so sorry, Shudra. Please don't be angry with me." Since he was an arhat, Abhedya didn't have any intention to be rude, but in the eyes of others, his apology was not only insincere but deeply offensive!

Because of this strong habit, the Buddha once reprimanded Abhedya saying, "As an arhat, shouldn't all your disturbing emotions have been eradicated? Why do you still carry on this old habit of speech from your past five hundred lifetimes?" Afterwards, Abhedya managed to rid himself of this habit once and for all.

Overcoming Our Strong Habits

Since even some arhats are still subject to their past habits, it is hardly surprising that we ordinary people are prone to strong habitual tendencies too. In a meeting yesterday, some of those present made nicknames for the others and addressed them in derogatory ways such as big-nosed, shorty, etc. Even though they had been asked not to, they just couldn't shake off this habit. In addition to that, I notice that some monastics speak very loudly, which I assume is a tendency they have developed in this life. Having stayed in all sorts of environments, especially big cities which are full of crowds and noise, when they come to a silent place, it is difficult for them to speak softly all the time.

Regardless of how stubborn our habits may be, all of us—monastics and laypeople alike—should make every effort to change them. While it may be impossible for us to get rid of all of them at once, still, we need to be mindful of our behavior and speech and try to counteract our negative habits as much as possible. In particular, monastics should try to speak softly and avoid being too loud or disturbing. Though this might not be so much of a problem in big cities where among throngs of people, the volume of one's voice doesn't matter so much, in a peaceful place like Larung Gar, this could easily disturb others.

For instance, if someone is walking close to where dozens of practitioners are conducting solitary retreat in their own wood cabin, and suddenly shouts out, “Do you have any yak dung for sale?”, or “How much is that cabbage?”, or “Are we getting any electricity today?”, this can be extremely disturbing to the meditators. If one of those meditators hears what he or she says, for example about the cabbage, it might give rise to all kinds of thoughts in their mind, like “What! A cabbage?” They may have been visualizing the Buddha but when they hear this remark, all they see is a cabbage in front of them! They then begin to wonder how much the cabbage costs, what to make for lunch, and so on and so forth. This kind of disturbance should definitely be avoided. We need to be very mindful of this.

Concerning how loudly one speaks, I have stressed this many times in my lectures. But since even arhats can find it difficult to change their habits, it is not surprising that some people continue to be loud despite all the reminders I have given them. A few days ago, I saw two female students chatting together ahead of me. I was walking well behind them, at least 50 meters apart, but I could still hear their conversation very clearly. It was all about meaningless topics—not only were they not doing themselves any good, they were also potentially disturbing other practitioners around them.

According to the precepts, if we wish to speak to someone, we snap our fingers to get his or her attention, especially when in a practice session. If you call out loudly, "Hey! Hey!", your voice will surely affect the people around you. If a talkative person starts to gossip in the middle of a quiet place where others are trying to memorize texts, read sutras, meditate, or contemplate the teachings, this behavior will disrupt their cultivation of virtue. It's very likely that whoever does this isn't so keen on study or practice themselves.

Even worse than this, some people seem to like to pick conflicts. They don't care about the other people around them because they get swept away by their strong emotions, even to the point of losing control. While showing off their "superhuman power", they are not at all mindful of others. I hope you will all be considerate of others when you talk in public. We are responsible for ourselves, are we not?



Upasaka Dharmatala

UPASAKA DHARMATALA

THE SEVENTEENTH ELDER

We pay homage to the noble upasaka Dharmatala,
Whose hair is in a topknot and who carries volumes
of Dharma,
Who sees Amitabha in the sky before him,
And who holds a fly whisk and vase:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

All the sixteen sages that we have so far talked about are ordained arhats whereas the seventeenth elder, Dharmatala, is an upasaka (layman). His hair is tied in a topknot and he carries volumes of Dharma texts on his back. His clothes are similar to those worn by some Tibetan yogis, or the way that Padmasambhava is sometimes depicted in paintings, wearing robes. He looks into the space before him and visualizes Buddha Amitabha, his main deity, constantly. The fly whisk that he carries brings cool relief to sentient beings suffering from the burning heat of afflictions and anguish. The vase that he holds in his other hand provides waters for the Sixteen Arhats to bathe, wash their feet, and so forth.

Who Is Dharmatala?

In relation to the Sixteen Arhats, there is no mention of Dharmatala in the source texts of the Han Buddhist tradition, but he is referred to in Tibetan Buddhist records. He is said to be a Chinese layman who lived during the reign of Emperor Suzong in the Tang Dynasty, the son of Emperor Xuanzong. Since the time of Xuanzong, the Tang Dynasty began to decline and the country entered a period of instability. Emperor Suzong, however, was very supportive of Buddhism and made significant contributions to ensure the propagation of its many aspects. For example, he revered Master Amoghavajra as his teacher and received empowerments from

several different masters. He also ordered the construction of eighty-one Life Liberation Ponds across the length of the country.

It is said that Emperor Suzong sent a noble sage to India to invite the Sixteen Arhats to the Han regions, for the summer retreat. This noble sage might have been Dharmatala, or another enlightened monk, depending on which text you consult. The Sixteen Arhats were invited to join the summer retreat in a particular monastery, but no records have been found that identify which one it was. During the retreat, Dharmatala served them closely. Since the weather was very hot, he fanned the arhats with his fly whisk to provide them with cool relief and used the vase to carry water to wash their feet.

In Tibetan paintings, Dharmatala is always shown to be accompanied by a tiger. The tiger served as protector of the Sixteen Arhats during their summer retreat. Since the Sixteen Arhats were staying near a large forest and frequently went into the woods during their retreat, to ensure their security, Dharmatala, who was by then an accomplished mahasiddha, tamed a ferocious tiger and commanded it to protect them.

Some texts say that Dharmatala was in fact a laywoman. I wasn't sure about this claim, so I asked Khenpo Depa the other day if he could verify this. Khenpo-la confirmed that Dharmatala is indeed

said to be an upasika in some Buddhist records. The tiger that accompanied her protected her from being harmed by people with malicious intent. Since she lived in a forest, she needed to be especially careful to safeguard her precepts. I've seen thangkas of Dharmatala but still can't tell whether it is a man or woman, since the artists have skillfully depicted her in a gender-neutral form.

Either way, what we do know is that Dharmatala is a truly remarkable sage. As mentioned at the beginning, this prayer was composed by the great Kashmiri Pandita, Shakyashri. He purposely added Dharmatala as a seventeenth elder, therefore he/she must have possessed extraordinary qualities. Otherwise, since the Sixteen Arhats are no ordinary monks, they would not have responded to an invitation unless it came from someone very special. Dharmatala must have used extraordinary skillful means to supplicate them. Also, in the Tibetan texts, Dharmatala is clearly referred to as a "noble one". In the Tibetan text, he is called "the sublime upasaka" in this verse, but in the Chinese translation, his title has been abbreviated so as to preserve the meter.

Dharmatala is said to be an emanation of Avalokiteshvara. Given that Avalokiteshvara regards Buddha Amitabha to be his principal deity, Dharmatala also visualizes Amitabha and prays constantly to him. Therefore, if we recite this prayer continuously, it will create the favorable condition for us to take rebirth in Sukhavati.



Dhritarashtra
The Guardian King of the East



Virupaksha
The Guardian King of the West



Virudhaka
The Guardian King of the South



Vaishravana
The Guardian King of the North

THE FOUR GREAT KINGS

We pay homage to the Four Great Kings,
Who are mighty and wear the armor of diligence,
And who guard well the teachings of Buddha
In the four directions: east, south, west and north!
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may
 be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!

Next, we pay homage to the Four Great Kings, the four gods or deities who live on the lower slopes (fourth level) of Mount Meru in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and who guard the four cardinal directions of the world. To be specific, Dhritarashtra guards the east, Virudhaka the south, Virupaksha the west, and Vaishravana the north. Wearing the armor of diligence, the Four Great Kings guard each of the four directions and safeguard the Buddha's teachings through their miraculous power. We pray to the Four Great Kings for their blessings and invoke them to protect the Dharma and to secure the longevity of all Dharma teachers.

The Two Naga Kings and Two Garudas

Each of the Four Great Kings has their own distinct features and specialty. Different teachers explain this in different ways, for example: Since Vaishravana means "Son of He Who Has Heard Many Things", this king serves as a reminder that we need to increase our knowledge and become skilled in worldly affairs. Virupaksha in the west is often depicted with a dragon coiled around his body which represents change; it reminds us to be mindful of all the different kinds of change that are constantly taking place in the world around us. Dhritarashtra is often shown playing a stringed-instrument, which tells us that whatever we do, we should neither be too tense nor too loose, but follow the middle

way. Virudhaka carries a sword which symbolizes wisdom that cuts through afflictive emotions.

How did the Four Great Kings become lords of the world and protectors of the Dharma? When His Holiness was teaching *The Hundred Deeds*, he shared the following story with us. In times past when Buddha Kashyapa appeared in the world, two naga kings and two garudas lived on the slopes of Mount Meru. Because the garudas were the natural enemies of the nagas, the naga kings always had to be careful to avoid the garudas' harm. Later, the naga kings took refuge in the Three Jewels and the garudas were no longer able to harm them by force. Learning that this protection had come from taking refuge vows and observing the precepts, the garudas also went to see the Buddha, took refuge and followed the basic precepts.

After that, they became good friends. Together, they acted in accordance with the teachings of Buddha Kashyapa. Upon their death, they prayed to be renowned as lords wherever they were born and to uphold the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni. So, by the power of their aspiration, they were reborn as the Four Great Kings and protect all those who uphold the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni.

The Four Great Kings and the Days of Observance

In *The Sutra of the Four Great Kings*, it is said that the god Indra commanded the Four Great Kings to watch over humanity and to observe their behavior. This happens six times every month, on the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 29th, and 30th days respectively. These days are known, therefore, as “Days of Observance”. The Four Great Kings come to the human world on these days, watch over people’s behavior and offer their blessings. It is similar to the pledge that Padmasambhava made to his human disciples, before departing for the Raksha land of Ngayab Ling—that he would visit the human world on the tenth day of every Tibetan month.

Generally, if we fail to remember and invoke a particular buddha or deity, they will not appear to us. On the other hand, if we do recollect them, they will manifest before us. This is exactly what the Buddha stated in the scriptures—that he would always appear before those disciples who think of him. There are, however, certain celestial kings and sublime beings who made a special commitment to offer blessings on specific days and even if we don’t purposely recollect them, they will still bestow their blessings upon us at those times.

Many Buddhists mark these days by engaging in special practices, such as performing sojong on the 30th and making a tsok offering on the 25th. These traditions relate to specific commitments made by buddhas and bodhisattvas and can bring us great blessings and benefit. The same applies to the Four Great Kings who have been charged to come to our world and watch over humanity on these Days of Observance. Although *The Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *The Sutra on the Mahayana Principle of the Six Paramitas*, and *The Sutra of the Four Great Kings*, each offer different versions of when these Days of Observance occur, generally, the 8th, 10th, 15th, and 30th of every month are commonly regarded as especially significant days.

The Importance of Observing Special Days

I hope that all Buddhists will recognize the importance of these special days and try to perform virtuous deeds on them. For example, on the 8th, 10th, 15th, and 30th of every month, we should make special offerings to the Three Jewels.

When I was little, I had a neighbor who was an old monk. He made a great impression on me because of all the routines and customs that he followed. Making offerings on those special days was one such habit. Now, since I'm so busy every day with many different duties, I'm not able to make daily offerings to the Three Jewels as I used to, but I have maintained the good habit of making

offerings on those special days. For instance, if today is the 8th, an auspicious day, I would uncover my precious thangkhas, display them properly, and make offerings in front of them, even if only a lamp, since it is very important to make offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas on those special days.

Nowadays, from what I observe, young Tibetans seem to be increasingly affected by the degenerate times that they live in and they forget all about these traditions. On auspicious days, most young Tibetans watch TV, browse the Internet, chitchat, go for a coffee, or do other mundane things, just as usual. They don't think about performing virtuous deeds.

They don't, for example, say on the 15th of each month, "I should make offerings to the buddhas and recite some mantras", "Even if I couldn't observe life-long vows, today I'd better keep the precept of not eating after noon", "I should uphold the eight precepts today", "I should do some prostrations in front of the Three Jewels", "Since virtues and non-virtues multiply exponentially on this special day, I should refrain from sexual misconduct, false speech, and other negativity", or "Although I'm nothing like the monastics who observe pure precepts their whole life, as a Buddhist, I should at least do some practice or accumulate some positive actions on this special day."

Many young people seem to have lost the habit of performing virtuous deeds on special days. Tibetan elders, however, hold much precious knowledge and have observed these traditions throughout their entire lives. This is why I admire the older generation of Tibetans so much. Sadly, as they pass away, the knowledge and traditions that they hold may not get passed down to future generations.

These days, more than ever, we have access to all sorts of information—we become good at using the internet, commenting on others, and discussing a drama or TV show. This kind of knowledge, however, will hardly bring us any benefit—and will only end up contaminating our minds. It is of no substantial value for our present or future lives. However, because the world is more and more corrupted by materialism and over-consumption, this kind of valueless knowledge is nonetheless encouraged and widely disseminated. As a result, spiritual values and teachings that truly benefit people inevitably become undervalued. Many people disregard them, feeling they are not compatible with mainstream science. Some even attack spirituality, saying “It is superstition”, “It is nonsense”, or “It is old-fashioned thinking”. They think that a progressive society doesn’t need these outdated practices. However, if such priceless spiritual teachings are disregarded, can we really say this is a progressive society?

Praying Constantly to the Four Great Kings

In both the Tibetan and Han Buddhist traditions, the Four Great Kings are usually displayed prominently at the entrance of the monastery. The first chamber that you enter in a Han Buddhist monastery is almost always dedicated to the Four Great Kings. Originally, only statues of the Four Great Kings would appear there. From the Song Dynasty onwards, monasteries began to build prayer halls dedicated to Maitreya, in the form of Master Budai. At first, only Maitreya's statue was installed in this hall. Later, however, Maitreya was moved and placed in a central position in the Hall of the Four Great Kings. In the Tibetan regions, almost every monastery has paintings of the Four Great Kings at the entrance, either on the outside or inside of the gate.

No matter what form they take, you will surely see the Four Great Kings when you enter a monastery. When you see them, you should make an aspiration to propagate the Dharma and to protect the lives of the great masters, just as they have done. For example, you can say to yourself, "May I emulate the Four Great Kings and always safeguard and help spread the Dharma!"

It is important to place images of the Four Great Kings inside the main shrine hall, as well as inside our private shrine room, and to pray to them constantly. In addition to protecting the Dharma,

they also grant great blessings and protect all those who uphold and practice the Dharma. Since we are ordinary practitioners, we certainly need their blessing and protection. Never think that you don't need to venerate them since the nature of everything is emptiness. Before we reach that level of realization, we need to engage in positive actions and meritorious activities as much as possible, with all our effort.

The Best Way to Practice the Dharma

In the meantime, since we are habitually inclined to non-virtue, we should summon all our mindfulness and vigilance to guard against negativity.

For true beginners and ordinary practitioners, the best way to practice the Dharma is to recognize one's negative thoughts, try to eliminate them, and practice confession regularly. Of course, it's impossible for us not to make a single mistake each day, just as it's impossible for us not to have any negative thoughts. However, when a negative thought does arise, we should first recognize it and then reject it. If that doesn't work, we should sincerely confess it. This is the approach that every Dharma practitioner should take in their daily practice.

We shouldn't become discouraged by any slight difficulties we may encounter and then give up our Dharma practice. In our daily life,

there are always ups and downs, joy and sadness—it would make no sense if we were to lose faith in life or fall into a depression just because we experienced one upsetting event.

THE FINAL DEPARTURE OF THE SIXTEEN ARHATS

The *Nandimitravadana* explains clearly and precisely how the Sixteen Arhats uphold the Dharma and benefit beings of this world. If anyone helps the sangha in a positive way and with a pure mind, such as making offerings of food, clothing, bedding, cushions, medicine, and so on, the text says that the Sixteen Arhats and their retinues will appear within the sangha, as ordinary beings, to accept the offering. The donors will thereby accumulate even greater merit from their offerings.

In the future, when the human lifespan is as short as 10 years, the world will be full of wars and the Buddha's teaching will temporarily vanish. When the human lifespan gradually increases to 100 years, beings will grow weary of wars and inflicting harm on each other and begin to cultivate virtue. At that time, the Sixteen Arhats along with their retinues will appear in the world, praise and teach the supreme Dharma, and help guide people onto the

noble path. The Dharma will then remain in this world and prosper until the human lifespan reaches 60,000 years.

When the human lifespan is 70,000 years, the Dharma will vanish completely from the world. At that time, the Sixteen Arhats and their retinues will gather at Jambudvīpa and, using their miraculous powers, erect a huge and magnificent stupa made from the seven precious jewels. Inside, they will place Dharma texts and sacred relics of the Three Jewels. They will then circumambulate the stupa, make offerings, and recite prayers of praise.

Afterwards, they will ascend to the sky and declare, in the presence of the stupa, "The world-honored one, tathagata, the complete and perfect Buddha Shakyamuni, to you we pay homage! We have been entrusted to protect and uphold the Dharma so that beings can continuously benefit from it. Now, since beings of the current time are no longer able to benefit from the Dharma, we have fulfilled our promise and are ready to enter nirvana."

Having spoken these words, they will all enter nirvana without leaving a trace behind; their physical forms will completely disappear. The stupa will then sink beneath the earth. From that moment onward, the supreme teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni will vanish forever from this world. A long time later, when the human life span reaches 84,000 years, the next Buddha Maitreya

will appear in the world to guide sentient beings to happiness and liberation.

In conclusion, having now studied this prayer to the Sixteen Arhats, I hope you will all pray to these noble beings to ensure the prosperity of the Dharma and the longevity of all Dharma teachers. Since we are currently practicing magnetizing activity, focusing now on this prayer of *Homage and Offerings to the Sixteen Elders* will undoubtedly be an auspicious support to our future Dharma path and activities.



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