

An Introduction to Sakadawa, the benefits, and an explanation of how whatever virtue one engages in in this month will greatly increase

Sakadawa is the name of the fourth Tibetan month, so the fourth Tibetan month is called Sakadawa. It is called Sakadawa because it is during this month the saka constellation arises.

As all of us sentient beings wish for greater happiness and also wish to avoid even small sufferings, we should therefore make effort in the methods for achieving our happiness and eliminating our suffering. And carrying out those methods depends on your virtuous karma or the amount of your merit. So, if you are endowed with a great deal of merit, you will have happiness and your suffering will be eliminated. As the Buddha said in the Extensive Play Sutra, “Merit bestows the ripening of happiness and eliminates all suffering. Also all the wishes of a person with merit will be accomplished.” Thus accumulating extensive and powerful merit is extremely essential.

The size and force of merit depends upon four factors: the field, the thought, the actual action, and the time. In terms of the field, for example, if you give merely a mouthful of food, the merit will be more powerful if you give to the field of qualities, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, or your own virtuous spiritual friend; to the field of kindness or field of benefit, your mother and father; or the field of the suffering, those who are sick, impoverished or destitute.

The thought with which you engage in virtue also impacts the merit accrued. When you are giving, even if it is just something small, if you have the motivation wishing to attain the state of Buddhahood for the sake of all mother sentient beings, and, in order to do that, you think how it is necessary to accumulate merit such as this, the merit will be greater. Additionally, if you rejoice in the merit of whatever virtue you have engaged in, then due to the force of the thought, the merit will be more powerful than otherwise.

Likewise, in terms of the actual action, even if it is a small object, if you give respectfully with all three, body, speech and mind, without a disparaging or prideful attitude, not looking down upon the recipient whatever their status, the force of the merit will be greater.

Finally, even if you give something small, but do so on auspicious dates or during auspicious times, or at the time when a place is plagued by famine or war, beset with some kind of extreme harm, then in terms of the time, the power of the virtue is greater, and therefore the merit will be very great. Therefore if each of these factors individually makes the accumulated merit particularly powerful, what need is there to say how very powerful and forceful the merit will be if you have them all present at one time?

Take the example of reaping a harvest, you need to have a good piece of land, have a strong wish to get a good harvest, then you make effort in the work. As for the time, if you do the work of planting during the spring, then it will result in a good harvest, and the result will be especially great. Therefore, during the times when Buddhas and bodhisattvas performed powerful special deeds, during the times of their blessings, whatever virtue or misdeed we engage in will be particularly powerful. Once we know this, it is important to make effort in abandoning negative actions and engaging in those that are positive.

Now I will explain a little bit about the festival of Sakadawa. Although generally there are many festivals, this fourth month of Sakadawa is recognized by all Tibetans, as well as in many Buddhist texts, as an especially important and special festival.

In addition, the twelve deeds displayed by the teacher, the Bhagavan in this world are referred to as the twelve deeds. Among these, eight are celebrated with well-known festivals. There is a celebration for commemorating the Buddha entering his mother's womb, his birth, his renunciation, his enlightenment, his turning of the wheel of dharma, his descent from Tushita, his display of great miracles, and his passing into final nirvana. From those eight, the Buddha's entering his mother's womb, his attainment of perfect enlightenment, and his demonstration of passing into nirvana, are all three celebrated on the fifteenth day of Sakadawa. Furthermore, the eighth day of Sakadawa is the when the Buddha renounced samsara. And likewise, the fifteenth day of the month is also said to be the time when Gelongma Palmo obtained siddhi through her practice of Avalokitesvara. Since during Sakadawa there are many special commemorations, if you accumulate merit and purify negatives during this month, the virtues increase. Therefore, this month is also called the month of increase. Thus, engaging in however much virtue during this month is important. And the reason that we engage in the fasting ritual of

Avalokitesvara is as explained previously that, by meeting Avalokitesvara through carrying out the fasting ritual of Avalokitesvara, Gelongma Palmo obtained supreme siddhi.

Furthermore, usually, on the eighth, the fifteenth (full moon day), and thirtieth (new moon day), as well as at the time of an eclipse, the force of whatever virtue or misdeed one commits is said to be greater. This is because at the time of the full moon and the new moon, as well as at the time of an eclipse, there is greater fighting between gods and demigods. Likewise, the eighth is said to be the time when large sea predators kill many more creatures of the sea. Three days, the eighth, the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the waxing moon, as well as those three days of the waning moon, are said to be times when one should listen to and explain the dharma. This is because during these times gods inclined toward virtue descend to observe whatever virtues and misdeeds are committed. On the eighth day of the waxing and waning moon, the entourage of these virtuous gods comes. On the fourteenth day of the waxing and waning moon, the gods' sons and daughters come. And finally on the fifteenth day, the main gods descend. This is how it is explained in the Vinaya scriptures.

As explained above, the fifteenth of Sakadawa commemorates the Teacher's attainment of enlightenment; this is undisputed and commonly accepted. Moreover, it is said that at dusk the Buddha conquered Mara, during the night he remained in meditative equipoise, and at dawn he actually attained complete enlightenment. Although there are different explanations by scholars as to whether the dawn spoken of here is referring to early on the day of the fifteenth or if it is the dawn after the night of the fifteenth, in the Vinaya scriptures and as it is widely accepted, the dawn is early in the morning on the fifteenth. Therefore, the Buddha conquered Mara on the dusk of the fourteenth, that night he remained in meditative equipoise, and then after the night of the fourteenth, at the dawn of the fifteenth the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Therefore, based on the greater force of the flourishing of virtue, during these special times, the text of the Vinaya also states that the celebrations of the birth of the Buddha, his shaving of his hair, and his attainment of enlightenment, are times to teach the dharma. Also in the past, those with faith in the power of special times would give various offerings, taking the Buddha into town on a palanquin, inviting him to a

crossroads where people could make offerings and pay their respects, as it was said it is necessary to accumulate merit. Similarly, these days, in Tibet and other Buddhist countries, during auspicious times like Sakadawa, many people go to the temple and make offerings to the triple gem. They give charity to those in need, save lives of animals, engage in the fasting ritual of Avalokitesvara or take up the one day Mahayana vows, each making a great effort to engage in accumulating merit in accordance with his or her ability. So therefore even now it is traditional to make a great effort in virtuous activities in order to accumulate merit.

Also the Perfection of Wisdom texts describe the six perfections and the following six recollections among which there is one called the recollection of the Buddha. Although generally, you should recollect the Buddha every day, you should definitely do so at auspicious times and on special days. Furthermore, at this time of Sakadawa, think, “this is the time when the Buddha entered his mother’s womb, when he renounced samara, when he vanquished Mara, when he attained enlightenment, and when he passed into final nirvana.” A mind of faith recalling the Buddha in this way generates inexhaustible great merit. In the Exposition of the Vinaya it states that the power of the seven inexhaustible merits is so great that even when one is sleeping and so forth virtue will increase.

In brief, not only should you always make effort to abandon misdeeds and accomplish virtue, but also, especially during auspicious times or holy times, you should pay particular attention.

At the end of engaging in any virtuous activity, making a dedication prayer is important. As for how to dedicate, we should not dedicate the virtues we have accumulated for only our own benefit, or just for the happiness of our friends and relatives. Instead, we should make prayers for all these roots of virtue to become the cause of dispelling all one’s own and other sentient beings’ sufferings and to become the cause for quickly obtaining the unsurpassable perfect and complete state of enlightenment. If you make a prayer like this, this will serve as both a dedication and prayer.