

Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on *The 37 Aspects of the Path to Enlightenment*

Chart on the Eight Categories and 70 Topics: Extract from *Basic Program Study Manual for Maitreya's Ornament of Clear Realisations, Chapter 4*, compiled by Emily Hsu and Kok Wai Cheong, revised by Sally Ong and Ven. Sangye Khadro; an FPMT Masters Program Materials Project, edition February 2010, © FPMT, Inc.

Lesson 1

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Explaining the verses from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*: “This is the teaching of the Buddha.” “A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a lamp./ An illusion ...”

EXPLAINING THE VERSES FROM THE VAJRA CUTTER SUTRA

“This is the teaching of the Buddha.”

Do not commit any non-virtuous actions,
Perform only perfect virtuous actions,
Subdue your mind thoroughly —
This is the teaching of the Buddha.

We usually recite this verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra* before class. It says that we should abandon all non-virtues, strive in cultivating virtue and work to discipline our mind. This is like a summary of the Buddha’s teachings.

Why should we abandon committing all non-virtuous actions even if it is a small non-virtue? This is because we don’t like suffering. The only result that will arise from non-virtue is suffering.

Why do we need to perform perfect virtuous actions? This is because all of us want happiness. Yet we are not satisfied with just a little bit of happiness. If possible, we want real, permanent, everlasting happiness, i.e., a happiness that will not change. Since we want real, unchanging happiness, then we have to engage in perfect virtuous actions.

What constitutes a perfect virtuous action? This is an action that is not influenced or motivated by either attachment to the happiness of this life or attachment to the happiness of future lives. It must be a virtuous action that is done seeking the happiness of nirvana or liberation from samsara. If we want real, permanent, everlasting happiness and freedom from samsara, then we need to create their causes by engaging in such perfect virtuous actions.

“Do not commit any non-virtuous actions,/ Perform only perfect virtuous actions.” This is where we have the presentation of karma and its effects. Whatever karma or actions we accumulate, on their own, they will never ever go to waste.

- When we accumulate non-virtues, definitely, we will experience the result, suffering.
- When we engage in virtue, we will experience the result, happiness

It is extremely difficult to understand the workings of karma, especially the intricacies behind the workings of karma and its effects. This is not to say that we can't come to some understanding of the workings of karma and its effects through reflection and analysis and by using logic and reasoning. In fact, we can come to quite a good understanding of the validity of karma and its effects through reasoning, in particular, if we understand what an enlightened being is and what omniscience means. As the Buddha is the Omniscient One, we can trust the Buddha's proclamations and explanations of the workings of karma and its effects.

But even if we manage to achieve permanent, everlasting happiness for ourselves and free ourselves from the cycle of death and rebirth by achieving nirvana, this is not the end of the road. Even if we achieve nirvana, we still lack the full capacity to work for the welfare of others and to benefit all sentient beings. Achieving permanent, everlasting happiness for ourselves alone is inappropriate and not correct. Therefore, we must strive to attain the ability to do perfect work for all sentient beings. In order to do that, we have to overcome our self-cherishing attitude. In terms of the obscurations to be abandoned, we need to overcome the knowledge obscurations.

Even if we achieve permanent, everlasting happiness for ourselves, that is only the peace of nirvana. Even our own purposes have not been brought to culmination, i.e., we have yet to achieve our highest potential. If we have not reached our fullest potential, it goes without saying that we will not be able to do perfect work for others. We will not be able to fulfil the welfare of sentient beings. Even if we achieve liberation from cyclic existence, our mind is not yet completely separated from every single defilement or obscuration. Something still obscures the mind—the knowledge obscurations—that prevents us from attaining omniscience. So even though we achieve liberation, we have yet to remove those obscurations. As such, it is said that we have not fulfilled our fullest potential. If there are still obscurations obscuring our mind, then there is no way we can do perfect work for all sentient beings.

As such, we need to enter the Mahayana path, the path to enlightenment that is conjoined with the altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings. Then one generates the wisdom realizing emptiness. Upon generating the wisdom realizing emptiness, one seeks to develop that wisdom to its fullest capacity. That is when one achieves enlightenment.

This is a short verse that many people recite every day. We can commit it to memory and recite it daily as a way of reminding ourselves of the points that I have just talked about.

“Do not commit any non-virtuous actions.” Whenever we meet with problems in our lives, if we can remember this line, then we can remind ourselves that all the problems we meet in our lives are the results of not having abandoned non-virtues in the past. We get into trouble because we didn't follow the Buddha's advice.

Whenever we meet with difficulties and challenges and our mind is unhappy, we can tell ourselves that having an unhappy mind comes from an undisciplined or unsubdued mind. This is the reality. It is very clear. The reason we suffer and are unhappy is because our mind is not disciplined or subdued. All our problems and unhappiness come from that. The more disciplined the mind is, the more subdued it is, we will experience less unhappiness and problems. When the mind is completely subdued, then it doesn't matter what happens, I guess there is really no way for that person to be unhappy. So the extent to which we are affected by challenges or problems depends on whether the mind is subdued or not.

If we really understand and are convinced that the main cause of our suffering lies within us and not outside, this makes a huge difference to our worldview. Then many things become easier to handle.

Unfortunately, that is not how we see the world. Whenever we experience difficulties, instinctively, we always think that the problem lies out there: "It has nothing to do with me. It is not my fault. It is the fault of this situation and/or person." The source of the problem is always outside. We never think that the source of the problem comes from our own undisciplined mind. We never ever think that we are at fault. We always think that it is the fault of something or someone outside. When we have such a worldview, check whether the problem or unhappiness that we are experiencing becomes bigger or smaller. Not only does the problem not go away, it becomes bigger and bigger.

When we put the blame for all our problems, be it big or small, outside, blaming the situation or someone else, our problems will not go away or get smaller. They only become bigger and bigger. Obviously, that is a sure sign that we have gotten it wrong and that our belief that the problems lie outside is a wrong belief. All this comes back to not following the Buddha's advice and not subduing our mind.

We have to be able to see for ourselves and be convinced that the main cause of suffering lies within us and not outside.

- Any problem we may experience is the result of some non-virtuous karma that we accumulated in the past.
- Furthermore, we need to generate the heartfelt admission that whatever problems we experience, our difficulties and unhappiness come from our unsubdued mind.

When we put these two understandings together, they will make a huge difference. They become the bedrock, the very foundation, of our practice, our pursuit of happiness and the way we lead our lives.

Whether you are able to study the Buddhadharma extensively or not, recognizing that your problems do not come from the outside but from within you should be the foundation for everything else.

A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a lamp,
An illusion, a drop of dew, or bubble,
A dream, a flash of lightening, a cloud—
See conditioned things as such!

I have explained this verse in the past but there is no harm in going through it again. If you have some idea of the meaning of this verse and reflect on it regularly on a daily basis, it can be very helpful, especially when you meet with challenges in your life.

“A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a lamp”

~ *“A star”*

“A star” is the introduction to the two facets of reality, the two truths:

- a superficial level of reality, the conventional truth
- a deeper level of reality, the ultimate truth

In the mind of ordinary beings such as ourselves, we have different valid states of mind that are able to understand the superficial level of reality, the conventional truth. We called these minds valid cognizers. Specifically, in this case, we call them conventional valid cognizers. An example will be the mind that realizes a table, a flower or a cup. This mind is able to realize these objects based on their appearance. Objects that are realized by the conventional valid cognizer are conventional truths. In accordance with their appearance to the mind, we have to say that these objects exist.

How do we posit the existence of a phenomenon—whether a flower or a fruit exists? It is based on its appearing to the mind that realizes it; in this case, the conventional valid cognizer. As it appears, it is known to exist.

Is there something more to the flower than what appears to the conventional valid cognizer? Is the flower a mere appearance or is there another level of reality to the flower? This is what we need to think about.

The vast majority of us will not see anything beyond what appears to us. A flower appears to us in a certain way. That appearance is what constitutes the flower and, to us, there is nothing beyond that. It is just that one dimension of reality. We don't think that there is something deeper than that, something more than mere appearance. At the very most, we only interact with that appearance of the flower. That is it.

We don't see another dimension to that flower. In fact, there is a deeper dimension, another level of reality that we don't see. Although it is there, we don't see it. Why is this so? This is because our mind is obscured by the latencies of ignorance. As long as our mind is obscured by these defilements, we will not be able to see that deeper level of reality.

All kinds of objects appear to the conventional awareness—form, sound, smell, taste and objects of touch. Objects that exist appear to the conventional awareness. But even fabrications of reality, i.e., things that do not actually exist, also appear to the conventional awareness. Both existents and non-existents can appear to the conventional awareness that is polluted by the latencies of ignorance.

It is said that to the mind polluted by the latencies of ignorance, all kinds of things can appear. The analogy given is of the appearance of stars at night where the dark night is likened to the darkness or fogginess of ignorance. Just as stars can appear on a dark night, likewise, a whole variety of appearances can appear to the consciousness that is

polluted by the latencies of ignorance.

When we are able to remove these defilements from the mind, then the mind is able to see the final nature—the deepest level of reality—of the object in question. The object that is ascertained by such a mind is called the ultimate truth.

To reiterate, it is said that as long as it is an existent or phenomenon, it has two levels of reality.

- The superficial level of reality of the phenomenon that appears to the conventional awareness is posited as a conventional truth.
- The deepest level of reality of the phenomenon that appears to the mind is called the ultimate truth.

These two truths are realized by their respective valid cognizers:

- the valid cognizer distinguishing a conventionality
- the valid cognizer distinguishing an ultimate

Seeing all the stars in the sky at night is the analogy for the conventional truth.

In the daytime, we see just the sky, this vacuity or space. The fact we do not see stars in the day is analogous to the experience of a person who has directly realized the ultimate nature of all phenomena. In the perspective of the mind of that person, no conventional truths appear. Nothing appears to the perspective of the mind directly realizing the ultimate nature of phenomena except emptiness.

Although a conventional valid cognizer is a mistaken consciousness, nevertheless, it is valid or correct with regard to what is appearing before it. The object that it realizes, such as the flower, is valid and correct. Although a conventional valid cognizer is valid with respect to the object it realizes, for example, a flower, nevertheless, it is considered a mistaken consciousness. In what way is it mistaken? Although the flower appears to this mind, at the same time, it appears to this mind to be truly or inherently existent while it is not. The conventional valid cognizer is mistaken in that sense.

So although conventional valid cognizers are valid cognizers with respect to what they are realizing, nevertheless, they are still considered mistaken in that whatever they realize, that realization comes with an appearance that is a fabrication of reality. An apple appears to be truly existent while it is not truly existent. In that sense, the conventional valid cognizer is considered a mistaken consciousness. This is in accordance with the tenets of the highest philosophical school, the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS).

On the other hand, a wisdom directly realizing emptiness is not a mistaken consciousness. Why? Because in the perspective of that wisdom directly realizing emptiness or in the perspective of a superior's meditative equipoise, only emptiness appears. Nothing else! No conventional truths or conventionalities appear. Why? Because that mind in meditative equipoise is not affected by the latencies of ignorance.

This is why we need to deepen our understanding of the workings of the mind. At the

present time, we only have a conventional awareness. All kinds of things can appear to the conventional awareness—things that exist, i.e., existents, and things that do not exist, i.e., non-existents. This is obvious. This term, “conventional awareness” can include both correct states of mind and completely illogical and wrong states of mind, i.e., it includes both right minds and wrong minds. For example, a wrong or perverse consciousness is a conventional awareness. It is wrong because the object that a wrong consciousness believes in actually does not exist.

Whereas based on the appearance of a phenomenon to a conventional valid cognizer, it is able to posit and ascertain its existence. The phenomenon that appears to the conventional valid cognizer does exist. We see apples, fruits, tables, flowers and so forth. The mind that sees these objects is valid in that whatever is appearing to it exists. For example, the apple that appears to the eye consciousness, which is a conventional valid cognizer, exists and as it appears, it functions.

Another example. The mind thinking that a rabbit has horns. In the perspective of that mind, it believes a rabbit has horns. Although in the perspective of that wrong consciousness, there is a rabbit with horns, in reality, there is no such thing. As such, the mind apprehending the horns of a rabbit is a wrong or perverse consciousness. It is a conventional *awareness* but it is not a conventional *valid cognizer* because it is a wrong consciousness.

Then it gets a bit complicated. A conventional valid cognizer realizing a flower is valid with respect to the flower. It realizes the flower, yet at the same time, the flower appears to this mind to be *truly existent*. While there isn't such a thing as a truly existent phenomenon, nevertheless, whatever appears to a conventional valid cognizer appears to be truly existent. So there is a part of that cognition that is mistaken, yet it is a valid cognizer.

To the conventional valid cognizer apprehending a flower, the flower appears to be truly existent. In reality, is the flower truly or inherently existent? Does it exist from its own side? The answer is no. Yet, the flower appears to be truly existent to the conventional valid cognizer realizing the flower.

If the flower exists in the way it appears, i.e., if the flower is indeed truly or inherently existent, this would be the deepest final nature of the flower. If that is the case, this truly existent flower would appear to the wisdom that directly perceives the ultimate nature of the flower. But in the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving the ultimate nature of the flower, the flower does not appear at all.

~ “A visual aberration”

To reiterate, if it is an appearance to a conventional valid cognizer, it is not necessarily an existent. To illustrate such a visual aberration, the example of seeing falling hairs or a shimmering mirage is given. In the shimmering mirage, while there is no water out there, it seems that there is a body of water. People with certain medical conditions may see falling hairs while there are no falling hairs. These illustrate that whatever appears to a conventional valid cognizer is not necessarily an existent. If whatever appears necessarily exists, then even those people whose eyes are not affected by the medical

condition would also see the falling hairs.

Khen Rinpoche: Those of you who have been coming to class for a long time should have no problem with this material. The new ones may have some difficulties there. We haven't started on the module topic yet!

Those of you who are here for the first time, read the handout when you go back after today's class.

Under certain conditions, a mirage appears. We may be led to believe that there is an actual body of water when there isn't any water out there. Likewise, while everything that appears to a conventional valid cognizer appears to be truly existent, that doesn't mean that the apple, tree, fruit and so forth are necessarily truly existent.

~ "A flame of a lamp"

Although apples, trees, flowers and so forth *appear* to the conventional valid cognizer to be truly existent, they do *not* exist truly. Having said that, it does *not* mean that the apples or flowers do not exist because they are not truly existent. We cannot say that. We have to be able to establish their existence. How do the apples and flowers exist? They are dependently arisen in that they exist through the coming together of their respective causes and conditions. They are nothing more than mere appearances.

The example of the flame of a butter lamp is used to illustrate this. A flame of a butter lamp does not exist on its own, in and of itself. Rather it exists through the coming together of many conditions like the butter or oil, the wick and so forth. Then the flame comes into being.

Samsara is that we seek to free ourselves from all the problems and sufferings.

Nirvana is that we seek to achieve permanent everlasting peace.

Both samsara and nirvana are equal in that they have never existed in and of themselves. The samsara (or cyclic existence) that we need to free ourselves from has never and will never exist in and of itself, from its own side or under its own power. Rather samsara is a result of our own karma and afflictions.

Likewise, nirvana, the liberation from all suffering that we want to accomplish, also does not exist in and of itself. Therefore, we need to create and gather all the conditions together before we can achieve liberation. We need to exhaust our karma and afflictions before our nirvana can be achieved.

This is a presentation of dependent arising (or dependent origination). Anything and everything that exists, exists as dependently arisen. This directly contradicts independent existence, i.e., something that is dependently originated *cannot* exist in and of themselves.

Do phenomena actually exist in and of themselves? They may appear that way but do they exist in that way?

If phenomena exist in and of themselves, then when we look for them, we should be able to find them. We should be able to point to something that is the designated object. But when we look for it, we will not be able to find the object. We cannot point to something that is the designated object. As such, anything and everything that exists do not exist in and of themselves because they are dependently arisen.

So how do we then explain the existence of phenomena? How do they exist if they don't exist inherently? They exist in mere name and as mere appearances.

At the end of the day, it is a matter of eliminating the possibilities.

- On one hand, obviously things exist and function. Nobody disputes that.
- Yet at the same time, things do not have independent existence, existing in and of themselves.
- Then how do they exist? We cannot say they don't exist because obviously, things do exist.
- The only alternative left is that they exist in mere name.

Any object in question has a superficial level of reality and a deeper level of reality.

- The superficial level of reality of the object—its mere appearance—is called the conventional truth.
- The deeper level of reality of the object—its emptiness of inherent existence—is an ultimate truth.

This is a short explanation of what constitutes reality. When we talk about reality, the whole of existence and anything that exists are contained in these two truths.

But is it enough to just having an understanding of this basis—the meaning of and what constitutes reality? The answer is no. Just knowing that reality is like this will not free us from suffering. Based on an understanding of these two levels of reality, what can we do to deliver ourselves from suffering? What is the method?

Based on the Buddha's thorough understanding of reality, the Buddha expounded and gave his first teaching on the four noble truths. The four noble truths is essentially an explanation of the cause and effect relationship pertaining to the class of thoroughly afflicted phenomena—the causes and conditions that keep us stuck and suffering in samsara—and cause and effect relationship pertaining to the class of thoroughly pure phenomena—the causes and conditions that we need to gather to free ourselves from samsara so that we can achieve nirvana.

If reality is what the Buddha has said—that there is a superficial level and a deeper level of reality—and if we can understand reality in terms of these two truths, why have we been suffering? Why are we still in samsara, taking rebirth over and over again? To help us understand what is keeping us in samsara, the next analogy of an illusion is used.

“An illusion”

Illusions can be very attractive or really frightening.

- If the illusion that is conjured by the illusionist or magician is a pleasant aberration, we develop an attachment and liking for it, believing the illusion to be real. Our mind gets excited.

- But if the illusionist conjures up something frightening or scary, we may develop aversion and fear and be frightened by it. Again, we believe the illusion to be real. Our mind reacts naturally and instinctively in that way.

The illusion conjured up by the illusionist, be it pleasant or frightening, is just an illusion. There isn't an object or person there. Nevertheless, we are affected by these illusions. We believe in them and we get sucked in. We generate either desire and excitement or fear and aversion, even though it is just an illusion.

The illusion is an analogy that can be applied to reality, especially when we meet with problems and difficulties. Whatever appears in our daily lives, particularly when we are suffering in an unhappy situation, how does that situation appear to us? It appears to be very real, existing in and of itself, from its own side. This is how it appears.

While it does not exist in that way, nevertheless, it appears to exist in and of itself, to be solid, independent and inherently existent. Furthermore, we *assent* to that appearance and we *believe* that is how the problem exists in reality. Based on the mind assenting to that appearance, then the whole range of emotions are invoked in us, from anger to attachment. We start to experience problems, unhappiness and all kinds of sufferings.

This is how we have been responding in our daily lives, from life to life in samsara. And this is how we have been getting ourselves into difficulties one after another. Based on assenting to that appearance of true existence, how do we stop ourselves from experiencing that again? The method to overcome this is explained by the next few examples. After "an illusion," there is "a drop of dew, or a bubble." We will look at them in the next lesson.

Khen Rinpoche: If you don't understand or are confused, you can ask one question. If you are clear, then that is OK. Those who are studying this seriously, please read the handout. I'm not going to go through everything. I will just give you some idea.

People may be thinking, "What do you study in Buddhism? If you study in the Master Program, what is there to study?" The handout is just an outline. To understand these two pages, it takes ten years!

So maybe I will go through that to give you some idea. It is good to have some idea of this topic.

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