

Transcript of teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on the *Heart Sutra and Stages of the Path* (the Six Perfections)

Root text: *The Heart of Wisdom Sutra* by Shakyamuni Buddha, translation Gelong Thubten Tsultrim (George Churinoff). Extracted from *Essential Buddhist Prayers: An FPMT Prayer Book, Volume 1*. Copyright: FPMT, Inc. 2008.

Lesson 6

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Review of the prologue. The cause of Shariputra's question & the question itself. The transition. The actual explanation. The assertions of the CMWS. Phenomena are merely imputed by & are mere appearances to the mind. Object of negation. Apprehension of true existence. Dependent origination.

Question: Why one must take the engaged bodhisattva vows in order to be enlightened? Why can't the bodhisattva just train in the six perfections alone?

Answer: If one is able to practise the six perfections, then personally I do not think that it has to be preceded by making a pledge or vow. After all, the bodhisattva vow is a pledge to practise the six perfections, is it not? Before one engages in the six perfections, one must really want to do so. That is akin to making a pledge.

Imagine that you are heading to an important destination. Before you set foot for that important destination, first you must have the idea and the wish to go there. It is a commitment, "I will go there". Based on that, you then actually set out. There are people who just go anywhere without thinking.

Khen Rinpoche: *These people do not reach that special place. They reach a different place.*

I think if it is an important task, that task probably has to be preceded by a commitment to accomplish the task.

Khen Rinpoche: *Maybe it is like that.*

In Lama Tsongkhapa's *Dependent Arising: A Praise of the Buddha*, he mentioned that he was indeed fortunate to have found even just a little faith in the Buddha before his life came to an end. Likewise we have the opportunity to study the teachings of the Buddha now. It is challenging when you study these philosophical teachings. Even if you do not manage to achieve any realisations or experiences, if you are able to develop some faith in the Buddha through learning and reflecting on the teachings, that makes you a very fortunate person indeed.

This is something that you should remember, keep in mind and feel happy about all the time. In particular you need to realise that you are very fortunate to have an opportunity to study and to learn the Buddha's teachings on emptiness.

Now you have the opportunity to learn together with many other people. Generally it

is difficult to study or to listen to the teachings on your own. That is much more challenging than if you were to do the same with a group of like-minded people. The presence of other people in class is a helpful condition for your own studies. As such you should consider everyone in this class to be precious and helpful. Therefore it is good to have mutual consideration and respect for one another. Thinking in such a way is helpful.

A monastery is a great seat of learning. In the monastery, students of the same class and who share the same teacher are generally very close-knit and very harmonious. They have a strong feeling of togetherness. Of course there will be disagreements at times but, in general, the overall feeling is, “We are together in the same class,” or “We have the same teacher”. The feeling of unity is very strong. This is the culture of learning in the monastery.

Likewise we can adopt the same kind of thinking here. You are all together in the same class. You should cultivate this feeling of unity. Therefore practise pure perception in relation to one another. When there is this feeling of unity or oneness in the class, then when it comes to activities such as discussions, there should not be any problems conducting them and so forth. Without such unity, even holding discussions is difficult. It is possible that there will be disagreements from time to time. This is normal. But you should always keep in mind the idea of coming together in unity and harmony.

All of you are studying the same material at the same time. When it comes to learning, you should not have the thought, “This is terrible. It is so difficult!” Rather you should learn willingly, voluntarily and happily. It is the same with regard to coming to class. You should come to class willingly, voluntarily and happily. Whether it is coming to class or engaging in your studies, in order for you to do so willingly, voluntarily and happily, that comes from knowing what is in it for you, e.g., the benefits of studying emptiness. We have talked a little bit about those benefits and the merit it generates.

Willingness is a happy feeling of doing something voluntarily. It comes about based on knowing the benefits without which generating such willingness may be really difficult. You come to class after a hard day’s work and you feel tired. When you do not understand what is in it for you, when you do not see the benefits, then of course it will be difficult. You have to understand that you are very fortunate to be able to learn even a little bit despite living in such a busy country with such a busy lifestyle. Please keep this in mind at all times.

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## **THE PROLOGUE**

The sutra starts with:

Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavan was dwelling on Mass of Vultures Mountain in Rajagriha together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas. At that time, the

Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called “Profound Perception.”

The section up to this point in the sutra constitutes the prologue.

*The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are mostly classified under the Sutra Pitaka. This makes *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* part of the Sutra Pitaka as well.

The sutra starts with, “Thus did I hear at one time.” The ‘I’ indicates the compiler who compiled this particular sutra. If *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* falls into the Sutra Pitaka, that makes Ananda the compiler of this sutra.

In the last lesson we looked at the compilation of the teachings of the Buddha. From a common perspective, the teachings were compiled during three councils. The teachings that were compiled are now commonly known as the *Pali Canon* which consists of the Hinayana teachings.

If you were to look at the compilation of the Buddhist teachings from the Mahayana perspective, then Vajrapani would be the compiler of this sutra.

“Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavan was dwelling on Mass of Vultures Mountain in Rajagriha together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas.” By reading this section of the sutra, you will get the idea that the Buddha gave this very special teaching called *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* at this very special place, Mass of Vultures Mountain.

Who were the Buddha speaking to? The teachings were heard by, “a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas.” This means that the listeners consisted of the persons of the three lineages or three vehicles.

### **SHARIPUTRA’S QUESTION**

“At that time, the Bhagavan was absorbed in the concentration on the categories of phenomena called ‘Profound Perception.’” This indicates that the Buddha, while remaining in meditative equipoise with that concentration, blessed Shariputra so that he would initiate the question that will be followed by the answer from Avalokiteshvara.

Next is the condition for the question to be asked:

Also, at that time, the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara looked upon the very practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and beheld those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

Following this is the question from Shariputra:

Then, through the power of Buddha, the venerable Shariputra said this to the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara: “How should any son of the lineage train who wishes to practice the activity of the

profound perfection of wisdom?”

The Tibetan translation of the sutra, which is a translation from the Sanskrit version, says, “How should any son of the lineage train ...?” The Chinese translation that also purports to be the translation of the Sanskrit version includes “the daughter of the lineage.”

In the Tibetan translation, only “the son of the lineage” is mentioned. When only “the son of the lineage” is mentioned, then “the son of the lineage” refers to Avalokiteshvara to whom the question is posed.

“How should any son of the lineage train who wishes ...”: The “who” would cover those who are not Avalokiteshevara, i.e., both the sons and daughters of the lineage. When you read it in such a way, then it is all right, because the person who is going to practise the perfection of wisdom is not just Avalokiteshvara but also the sons or daughters of the lineage.

When you do not know how to explain this, there will be problems because people will ask, “How about the daughters of the lineage? Does this mean only the sons of lineage can practise?” One has to be careful in explaining such things.

## THE TRANSITION

He said that and the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara said this to the venerable Sharadvatiputra. “Shariputra, any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom should look upon it like this, correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.”

“He said that and the bodhisattva mahasattva arya Avalokiteshvara said this to the venerable Sharadvatiputra. ‘Shariputra, any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage who wishes to practice the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom should look upon it like this’ ...” This is when the transition is made to the actual explanation that is to follow.

## THE ACTUAL EXPLANATION: BRIEF & DETAILED EXPLANATIONS

“... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.”: This is where the actual explanation begins. Of the actual explanation, between the brief explanation and the detailed explanation, “... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature” constitutes the brief explanation. The detailed explanation starts from, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form.” and so forth.

The brief explanation indicates the general procedure of the practice of the path of accumulation, the path of preparation, the path of seeing and the path of meditation. “... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.” is to be applied to all the four paths.

Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form.  
Form is also not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling,  
discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness are empty.

This section shows the way to meditate on emptiness while one is on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation.

You will remember from our discussion of the paths and grounds that:

- On the path of accumulation and the path of preparation, the meditation on emptiness is done via a meaning generality or mental image of emptiness.
- On the path of seeing, emptiness is perceived directly.
- On the path of meditation, one meditates on the emptiness that one has seen directly, i.e., familiarising oneself with what one has seen directly on the path of seeing.

“... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.” The ‘also’ indicates that not only is form and so forth empty of inherent existence, even the collections of form and so forth are also empty of inherent existence.

### **THE ASSERTIONS OF THE CMWS**

According to the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), emptiness of inherent existence is synonymous with empty of existing from its own side. This means that there are no phenomena that can exist from their own side.

The CMWS asserts that all phenomena are posited as mere appearances to the mind like the appearance of a dream elephant to the dream consciousness. In the dream, there is an appearance of a dream elephant, but that appearance of the elephant is not coming from the side of the object as there is no such object. Yet there is still the appearance of an elephant. That appearance is an appearance to the perceiving consciousness; in this case, the dream consciousness. Likewise all phenomena do not exist from their own side. They exist as mere appearances to the mind.

You can think of the emptiness of inherent existence by using the analogy of a dream elephant. In a dream, you have the appearance of a dream elephant. The dream elephant does not exist from its own side, i.e., there is nothing coming from the side of the object. It is a mere projection of the mind, a mere appearance to and a creation of the dream consciousness. There is no real elephant functioning out there.

Likewise all phenomena that exist exist as creations of the mind, as merely imputed by thought. Phenomena do not exist from their own side. We should use this analogy to understand how all phenomena do not exist from their own side. Rather all phenomena are posited as mere appearances to the mind.

Of course phenomena exist but how do they exist? They exist as mere appearances to a conventional mind or a conventional consciousness. When you are not satisfied with that level of appearance and you look deeper, you will not be able to point to or find the object. It is not findable.

When you try to look for the imputed object, you cannot find it; yet it exists. How does it exist? It exists as a mere appearance. You have to be satisfied with that. This is how things exist. Anything beyond that, you will run into problems.

### **PHENOMENA ARE MERELY IMPUTED BY THE MIND**

Before you can have any understanding of the meaning of the emptiness of inherent existence, the very first thing that you must understand is how all phenomena are merely imputed by the mind (or imputed by thought). This is the first step. The word *merely* eliminates inherent existence.

Let us go back to the example of mistaking a coil of rope to be a snake.<sup>1</sup> This happens when conditions are gathered, such as the weather and so forth. First the coil of rope appears to be a snake. On top of it appearing as a snake, we *believe* there is a snake. So there is an appearance of a snake from the side of the rope. The mind assents to that appearance and believes a snake is there.

Believing that there is a snake, fear arises and we start to worry. Without such a belief, there will be no fear. But when the mind assents to the appearance and believes that there is a snake, fear arises. The reality is that it is only a coil of rope. There is no snake there. When we look at the coil of rope, from one end to the other, we will not be able to find a snake on the rope. This is very clear. Still there is the mind that believes it to be a snake.

Is this belief that there is a snake imputed and made up by the mind? Is it not imputed by the mind? From this, we can see that the appearance of the coil of rope as a snake is a fabrication of the mind. It is not coming from the side of the rope. The mind imputes that it is a snake. This shows that the snake is imputed by the mind. The coil of rope being a snake is completely imputed by the mind. It has nothing to do with the coil of rope.

Think about this: The coil of rope appearing as a snake is a mere appearance to the mind.

Then you apply your understanding of that analogy to an actual object, for example, the sense of the 'I'. What is the sense of the 'I' or the thought apprehending 'I'? This 'I' is the same as the appearance of the coil of rope to be a snake in that it is a mere appearance to the mind.<sup>2</sup>

According to the CMWS, the 'I' is that which is merely imputed in dependence upon the bases of designation, the aggregates.

The aggregates are the body and mind. When elaborated, there are five aggregates:

1. form
2. feeling

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<sup>1</sup> This was discussed in Pages 8 – 10 of Lesson 25 of Module 3 on Tenets. The transcripts can be downloaded from this link: [http://www.fpmtabc.org/teachings\\_files/bp2ndM3.php](http://www.fpmtabc.org/teachings_files/bp2ndM3.php).

<sup>2</sup> *Ven Gyurme*: I am not saying that it is the same. You have to be careful with the English.

3. discrimination
4. compositional factors
5. consciousness

These five aggregates are the bases of designation of the person, the 'I'. The 'I' is merely imputed in dependence upon the aggregates.

When you look for the 'I' among the five aggregates one by one—the aggregate of form, the aggregates of feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness—you will not be able to find the 'I'. The 'I' is not the aggregate of form, it is not the aggregate of feeling and so forth.

This is the same as the analogy of mistaking a coil of the rope to be a snake. When you look for the snake in that coil of rope, from one end of the rope to the other, you will not be able to find anything that is a snake. Likewise when you look for the 'I' among the aggregates that is the basis of designation for the 'I', you will not be able to point to anything that is the 'I'.

When you think about it, what exactly is the 'I'? The 'I' is that which is merely labelled or merely imputed by thought in dependence upon the aggregates that are their bases of designation, just as the snake is merely imputed upon the coil of rope. Just as there is no snake on the coil of rope, likewise there is no 'I' on the aggregates. The 'I' is not the aggregates. It cannot be found on the aggregates.

Phenomena are merely imputed because they cannot be found among their bases of designation. The basis of designation is not the phenomenon itself. Therefore phenomena are merely imputed by thought. We can use various analogies to help us understand this. The analogy of mistaking a coil of rope as a snake is one. There is also the analogy of a dream elephant, the analogy of a mirage, the analogy of an echo and so forth. There are many such examples.

When you look for the 'I' among the bases of designation, the 'I' cannot be found among its bases of designation and the bases of designation is not the 'I'.

If the 'I' cannot be found there, is the 'I' of a different entity from the aggregates? When you look for an 'I' that is of a different entity from the aggregates, you will not be able to find the 'I' either.

- The 'I' is not the aggregates.
- The 'I' is also not of a different entity from the aggregates.

Are we saying then that the 'I' does not exist? No, the 'I' exists. The 'I' has to exist because we experience it. It is nonsense to say that the 'I' does not exist. The 'I' definitely exists.

How then does it exist if it is not inherently one with the aggregates and it is not inherently different from the aggregates?

According to the CMWS, the highest view, the ultimate reality is that the 'I' does not exist from the side of the aggregates:

- Phenomena do not exist from the side of their bases of designation.

- Phenomena are not their bases of designation.
- Yet phenomena exist.

How do phenomena exist? They exist as merely posited by the mind and specifically posited by the conventional consciousness.

Both of these are the same in that they are merely imputed by the mind:

- The coil of rope appearing as a snake is a fabrication of and is imputed by the mind.
- The 'I' or the self is none other than that which is merely imputed in dependence upon the aggregates.

But one does not exist and the other exists. There is a huge difference between the two:

- In the case of mistaking the coil of rope to be a snake, although the idea of the snake is imputed by the mind, in reality, the snake does *not* exist.
- However, in the case of the 'I', although it is also merely imputed by the mind, the 'I' *does* exist.

The mind apprehending a coil of rope to be a snake is a wrong consciousness because the coil of a rope is not a snake. There was never a snake there. Although the snake is merely imputed by the mind, in this case, the snake does not exist. Therefore this mind is a wrong consciousness.

In the case of the mind conceiving of and apprehending the 'I', this is a factually concordant mind because the 'I' does exist.

This is complicated because we are comparing two things:

1. the appearance of a coil of rope as a snake
2. the appearance of the 'I,' the self or person

Both of these appearances are merely imputed by the mind yet, in reality, one does not exist and the other does exist. This is the problem. Both are imputed by the mind but how do you account for the fact that one does not exist while the other does exist?

The essential point about settling the view of emptiness is that while you see that phenomena do not exist inherently, yet, at the same time, you are able to explain how they function. All phenomena are merely imputed, yet they perform functions. They actually work.

The first thing to figure out and to really understand is what it means when the CMWS says that all phenomena are merely imputed by the mind. We have to use the various analogies—the analogy of the dream elephant, the analogy of mistaking a coil of rope to be a snake, the analogy of an illusion, the analogy of a mirage, the analogy of an echo and so forth. The essential thing to understand first is this: Are things merely imputed by the mind? If so, how are phenomena merely imputed by the mind? This is the first thing to settle.



**OBJECT OF NEGATION**

According to the CMWS, all phenomena are merely imputed by the mind. Anything that is *not* merely imputed by the mind but exists from its own side, i.e., inherently existent, is the *object of negation* (or the *object of refutation*). This is what we need to refute and negate on the basis of knowing how all phenomena are merely imputed by the mind.

**APPREHENSION OF TRUE EXISTENCE**

The mind that conceives things and events to be inherently existent from their own side and to be not merely imputed by the mind is called *an apprehension of true existence*. An apprehension of true existence is the mind that conceives any phenomena to exist inherently.

If things existed exactly according to how the mind views the world, then this shows that there is indeed inherent existence, true existence and existence from its own side.

The CMWS asserts that *all* phenomena do *not* exist inherently. They do not exist from their own side. There is not a single atom of inherent existence from its own side. Everything is merely imputed by thought. This includes the 'I', the self or person.

Nagarjuna said in his *Precious Garland*, "A being is not earth, not water/ Not fire, not wind, not space,/ Not consciousness, and not all of them. What person is there other than these?" The different elements constitute a person but a person is not each of the elements nor is a person the collection of all of them. Then what is the person? Does the person exist? It has to exist.

So what is the answer? The person is that which is merely imputed in dependence upon the collection of the elements. You can think of the aggregates. When we look for the phenomenon among its basis of designation, e.g., the 'I' or person, we cannot talk about the 'I' or the person without talking about the body and the mind.

If the 'I' exists inherently, it should exist among its basis of designation, but the 'I' is not the aggregates. When we look for the 'I' among the aggregates, we will not be able to find the 'I'. This does not mean that we have found the non-existence of the 'I'. The correct analysis should lead us in the direction whereby we begin to feel that we are not finding the inherently existent 'I'. This is the correct direction. It is not about finding the non-existence of the 'I'. The wrong conclusion is that the 'I' does not exist. This is completely wrong. Instead the analysis should conclude with the understanding that indeed the 'I' is not inherently existent, that there is no inherently existent 'I'.

The inherently existent 'I' does not exist. We have to look for it among the aggregates in order to convince ourselves of this fact. When we look for it, what should we find in the end? We should find the non-existence of the inherently existent 'I', i.e., you should find that the inherently existent 'I' does not exist.

Finding that the inherently existent 'I' does not exist is *not* the same as finding that the 'I' does not exist. According to the CMWS, just because we have discovered that a particular object in question does not exist inherently, it does *not* mean that we have found its non-existence. When things do not exist inherently, it does *not* mean that they cannot exist. All phenomena do not exist inherently but they exist as merely imputed by thought.

## **DEPENDENT ORIGATION**

Phenomena that are existents obviously exist. But existence and inherent existence are not the same thing. Things that exist do not mean that things exist inherently. A phenomenon comes into being in dependence on causes and conditions. This makes that particular phenomenon dependently originated (or dependently arisen). This is dependent origination at the level of causality. A dependently originated phenomenon is not inherently existent. This is the essence.

Dependent origination and inherent existence are mutually exclusive. They contradict one another. If something exists by depending on something else, it cannot be inherently existent.

To gain an understanding of inherent existence, one of the best lines of reasoning is to use the logic of dependent origination. By using the logic of dependent origination, one comes to understand how things are empty of existing inherently and how things exist as merely imputed by the mind.

We return to the analogy of mistaking a coil of rope to be a snake. There is the appearance of a snake from the side of the coil of the rope. Now we have concluded that that appearance is a fabrication and creation of the mind and does not come from the side of the rope. The snake is just a mere imputation by thought. This is the reality but this is not how it appears.

The snake is merely imputed by the mind on the coil of rope. At the time when the mind does not realise that the snake is imputed by the mind, there is an appearance of a snake being projected from the side of the coil of the rope. Although this is not the reality, this is how it appears. The reality is that the snake is merely imputed by the mind. Nevertheless the appearance of a snake comes from the side of the coil of the rope.

Likewise although, in reality, the 'I' is none other than that which is merely imputed in dependence upon the aggregates that are its bases of designation, our experience of the 'I' is that it does not appear to be merely imputed in this way. The 'I' never appears to us to be merely imputed. The 'I' seems to exist among the body and mind. We think that the 'I' is coming completely from the side of the body and mind, that it exists from the side of the basis of designation. This is not the real problem yet .

The real problem is that we completely assent to that appearance. We believe completely in that appearance. This is how it is—it exists in the way it appears. This is the ultimate root of our circling in samsara.

Returning to the analogy of mistaking the coil of the rope to be a snake, although there is no snake from the side of the rope and the snake is a mere imputation by the mind, there is the appearance of the snake from the side of the rope. Not only is there this appearance but we assent to that appearance. We *believe* that there is a snake there. Because of this belief, there is fear and other problems follow.

Likewise all our problems and suffering come from our assenting to the appearance of the inherently existent 'I', our belief that the 'I' is inherently existent.

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So, "... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature." This is the brief explanation of the emptiness of inherent existence.

The extensive explanation follows with the presentation of the four-fold emptiness.

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