

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 Tultrim (George Churinoff). Extracted from *Essential Buddhist Prayers: An FPMT Prayer Book, Volume 1*. Copyright: FPMT, Inc. 2008.

Lesson 7

16 July 2013

Fourfold emptiness—the brief and detailed explanations. Training on the path of seeing.

Question: Can the phrase, “by the power of Buddha”, mean that the Buddha communicated with Shariputra through telepathy and directed Shariputra to ask the question?

Answer: Yes.

Question: I recall that the interpreter for His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentioned that the Tibetan word, *bu*, can mean *child* or *son*. With reference to Shariputra’s question, won’t “child” be the appropriate word to use since it can refer to a son or daughter? Furthermore the answer from Avalokiteshvara reflected the question because Avalokiteshvara said, “any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage,” so the question should refer to a child rather than a son of the lineage. Am I right to say that?

Answer: In general, the word *bu* in Tibetan could mean a child, but it often refers to a male. In this case, it has to be a son.

Khen Rinpoche: When you say “son,” you understand that it is a boy, right?

Student: Avalokiteshvara’s answer refers to “any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage.” Surely if someone asks you about the son, your answer will relate to the son and not son and daughter!

Answer: I mentioned that in the context of the question asked by Shariputra—“How should any son of the lineage ...”—perhaps it is better to understand that it is referring to Avalokiteshvara.

Student: But if the question says, “... any son of the lineage ...,” “any son” can refer to anyone.

Answer: In Tibetan, it is *rig kyi bu* (son of the lineage) followed by *gang la* that means *whoever*. Perhaps this is not clearly reflected in any of the available English translations.

When you look at the reply given by Avalokiteshvara, there must be a reason why he says, “son of the lineage and daughter of the lineage” It implies that the “son of the lineage” in the question from Shariputra does not refer to both males and females together. Therefore according to what I explained in the last lesson and what I said earlier, in the context of the question by Shariputra, it is better to understand the “son of the lineage” as referring to Avalokiteshvara. Otherwise there is no reason for Avalokiteshvara to say later, “son of the lineage and daughter of the lineage.” He could have just said “son of the lineage and whoever.” Anyway this is a non-essential point.

In Shariputra’s question, only “son of lineage” is mentioned and in Avalokiteshvara’s answer, “son of the lineage and daughter of lineage” are mentioned. This may seem strange. In order to account for that apparent difference, in some commentaries, it is mentioned that “the son of the lineage” in the context of the question from Shariputra should be understood to refer to Avalokiteshvara.

This is not apparent in the English translation as it says, “son of the lineage,” but in Tibetan it reads, “How should any son of the lineage *and whoever*” The “whoever” can encompass, in general, both sons and daughters. In the Chinese translation that purportedly is a translation from the Sanskrit version, in Shariputra’s question, both the son of the lineage and daughter of the lineage are mentioned.

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### **THE BRIEF EXPLANATION**

Shariputra begins by asking Avalokiteshvara how should anyone who wishes to train in the perfection of wisdom do so. In response, Avalokiteshvara says:

Shariputra, any son of the lineage or daughter of the lineage who wishes to practise the activity of the profound perfection of wisdom should look upon it like this, ...

The brief explanation on how one should train in the perfection of wisdom is given next:

... correctly and repeatedly beholding those five aggregates also as empty of inherent nature.

The answer given by Avalokiteshvara gives an overview of how the perfection of wisdom is practised on the Mahayana paths. Soon you will see how the perfection of wisdom is practised on the Mahayana path of accumulation, path of preparation, path of seeing and path of meditation. What follows is an expanded explanation of that brief statement.

### **THE DETAILED EXPLANATION**

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 pertains to training in the perfection of wisdom on the Mahayana path of accumulation and the Mahayana path of preparation.

*“Form is empty.”*

*Form* here refers to one’s own form aggregate that is empty. What is it empty of? It is empty of inherent existence, i.e., our form aggregate is empty of existing inherently.

What is the aggregate of form of a person? It is an appearance to the perspective of a non-investigating, non-analysing conventional consciousness. When form is investigated by a mind that is engaged in ultimate analysis, the inherently existing form is not found, i.e., form existing from its own side is not found. So essentially, form is none other than an appearance to the perspective of a non-investigating, non-analysing conventional consciousness.

Form does not exist from its own side just as a dream elephant does not exist from its own side. What is a dream elephant? It is just an appearance to the dream consciousness. Likewise the aggregate of form does not exist from its own side. Form is none other than a mere appearance to the consciousness. Therefore form is in the nature of emptiness. The nature of form is emptiness.

Then doubt may arise. If form does not exist inherently, does it mean that form does not exist? Is form non-existent because it does not exist inherently?

The answer is no. While form is empty of existing inherently, form can be posited as a mere appearance conventionally.

Think of the analogy of the dream elephant. While it is true that the dream elephant is not established as a real elephant, nevertheless, one can still posit the appearance of the dream elephant. A dream elephant is empty of being an elephant but that does not eliminate or negate the fact that the dream elephant still appears. One can posit the appearance of a dream elephant.

When you understand that analogy, likewise when you apply this to the meaning of the aggregate of form, while form is empty of existing inherently, that does not negate the mere appearance of form conventionally. The very fact that form is empty of inherent existence does not negate or stop one from being able to posit form as a mere appearance conventionally.

If you find both the analogy and the meaning difficult, then that is really difficult. The analogy is supposed to be easier than the meaning.

*Khen Rinpoche: The analogy is easy or not?*

There are three ways of asking the same thing:

1. Is the dream elephant an elephant?
2. Is the dream elephant established as an elephant?
3. Is the dream elephant empty of elephant?

All these are different ways of saying that a dream elephant is not an elephant.

*Khen Rinpoche: This is the question. You get 50 marks. True or false? Yes or no? Do you still doubt that the dream elephant is not an elephant? Isn't the answer, 'No'? Why?*

(Student's answer is inaudible).

*Khen Rinpoche: Why is a dream elephant not an elephant?*

Many of you have already studied tenets. If you are not able to answer this question, that is really not acceptable.

(Student's answer is inaudible).

If the dream elephant is an elephant then it also follows that, in the dream, when you are a billionaire, then you will be a billionaire. Then you don't have to work so hard.

Generally speaking, a dream consciousness is a mistaken consciousness. While the dream elephant appears as an elephant, it is not an elephant. It is a mistaken appearance. A dream elephant is not established as an elephant. Therefore a dream elephant is empty of being an elephant. *While* a dream elephant is not established as an elephant, *while* a dream elephant is empty of being an elephant, it does not negate the appearance of a dream elephant. One can conceive of a dream elephant as if it exists. Likewise while form is empty of inherent existence, while it is empty, there is no contradiction in its existing as a mere appearance to a consciousness.

If you were asked, "Is a dream elephant an elephant?" you have to say, "No!"

If subsequently you were asked, "Does a dream elephant exist?" you will have to say, "Yes."

There is a dream elephant but the dream elephant is not an elephant.

If you say a dream elephant exists, if you were to pursue this further, what exactly is a dream elephant? Dream elephant is a phenomena source form.<sup>1</sup> A dream elephant is a mere appearance to the mind; in this case, the dream consciousness. A dream elephant is nothing other than that. Can you posit something else as a dream elephant other than that?

This is the analogy of the dream elephant. There are many other similar analogies. The illusory elephant that is conjured up by an illusionist exists but it is not an elephant. The moon reflected in water is not the moon but the reflection of the moon in the water exists. Another analogy is the reflection of an object in the mirror. The reflection of the object is not the object itself but the reflection in the mirror exists.

The illusory elephant conjured up by the illusionist exists but the illusory elephant is not an elephant. If the illusory elephant exists, what is it? It is none other than the appearance of an elephant to the eye consciousness of the audience and the illusionist. This analogy is similar to the analogy of the dream elephant.

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<sup>1</sup> A phenomenon source form is a form that appears to the mental consciousness.

*Khen Rinpoche: Are you settled with regard to the examples given? No?*

In explaining the meaning of how form is empty, it is just like the analogy of the dream elephant that is not an elephant, i.e., a dream elephant is empty of an elephant. The very fact that the dream elephant is empty of an elephant does not contradict or stop a dream elephant from appearing. There is no contradiction.

Likewise while form does not exist inherently, one can posit form to be a mere appearance conventionally. The fact that form is a mere appearance conventionally is not contradicted or negated by the fact that form is empty of existing inherently.

*“Emptiness is form.”*

If form is empty of existing inherently, does it mean that form ceases to exist? The answer is no.

While form is empty of existing inherently, it still exists. The next sentence in the sutra addresses this point, “Emptiness is form.” While form is empty of existing inherently, one can posit form still, i.e., one still can account for form’s existence. This is the meaning of, “Emptiness is form.”

A qualm may be raised at this point. One may wonder, “Just as a dream elephant is empty of elephant, does that mean form is empty of form?” The answer is no.

This is the wrong way of applying the analogy to the meaning. If one thinks, “Just as a dream elephant is empty of elephant, likewise when you apply that analogy to the meaning, with regard to form, that means form is also empty of form.” That is not so. The way to apply the analogy to the meaning is this: “Just as a dream elephant is empty of elephant, likewise form is empty of existing inherently.”

The analogy is to help us understand that, although form *appears* to exist inherently, form *does not exist* inherently. The purpose of linking the analogy of the dream elephant to the meaning is to help us understand the meaning by way of an example that is well known to the world, i.e., an example that would be easily understood by ordinary people who have not realised emptiness. Everyone understands that a dream elephant is not an elephant. When one wakes up from the dream, one understands that it is just a dream and a dream elephant is not an elephant. One does not need to have realised emptiness to realise that the dream elephant is not an elephant.

Remember in our discussion of the CMWS in the previous module on tenets, there was a division of conventionalities into real and unreal. That division is made from the perspective of a worldly consciousness.

While an ordinary person who has not realised emptiness is able to realise that a dream elephant is not an elephant, it is a different matter when it comes to form, because form is a real conventionality in the perspective of a worldly consciousness.

An ordinary person who has not realised emptiness apprehends form to be inherently existent, believing that is how it exists, i.e., it exists in the way it appears.

Form appears to be inherently existent and one assents to that appearance. From the perspective of a worldly consciousness, the conventionality, form, is real, existing in the way it appears. For an ordinary person who has not realised emptiness, there is no disparity between reality and appearance and that person is unable to see that there is a great disparity between how things exist and how they appear.

We take everything that appears at face value. Everything exists in exactly the way it appears, as inherently (or truly) existent. It is only through a gradual process of investigation, using logic and reasoning that one can come to see that there is a disparity between reality and appearance, especially after one realises emptiness. Only then can one realise that form is not true (or not real). It is a falsity.

- Form is empty.
- What is form empty of? Form is empty of inherent existence or existing inherently.
- While form is empty of existing inherently, form exists as a mere appearance conventionally. While it is empty, there is no contradiction that there is nothing that can stop someone from positing form.

Therefore “Emptiness is form.”

Think about this, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form.”

- The whole point of the analogy of the dream elephant is to help us understand that while a dream elephant is not an elephant that does not negate the existence of a dream elephant. You can account for a dream elephant even though a dream elephant is not an elephant.
- Likewise while form is empty of existing inherently, this does not necessarily entail that form does not exist. While form does not exist inherently, form exists conventionally.

*“Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness.”*

A qualm may arise about the relationship between form and its emptiness:

- Form is a compounded or impermanent phenomenon. The emptiness of form is an un-compounded phenomenon.
- Form is a conventional truth while the emptiness of form is an ultimate truth.

The qualm then is this: Are form and its emptiness separate entities?

The answer is no. They are not different entities. A form and its emptiness are one, not separate entities. Therefore *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* says, “Emptiness is not other than form.” Here, “not other than form” means that the emptiness (of form) is not a different or separate entity from form itself.

Then the sutra continues, “... form is also not other than emptiness.”

“Emptiness is form” cannot be taken literally as it does not mean that emptiness *is* form. How can emptiness be form? How can an un-compounded phenomenon be a compounded phenomenon? What it means is that while form is empty of existing inherently, within the emptiness of form, while it is empty, you can still account for form as form and the emptiness of form as not being different entities. They are one entity.

Going back to the analogy of a dream elephant, a dream elephant and its emptiness of elephant are one entity. Likewise we should understand that form and form's emptiness (of inherent existence) are one entity. This is expressed by, "Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness." This shows that the entity of form is not separate from form's emptiness of inherent existence.

A dream elephant is empty of elephant. It is not an elephant. So you cannot talk about a dream elephant separate from its emptiness of an elephant. If you separate the two, can you logically account for one and not the other?

Form and form's emptiness of existing inherently are not the same thing. They are different but they are one entity. Although they are one entity, they are not the same.

- "Form is empty" helps us to realise that form does not exist inherently.
- "Emptiness is form" helps us to understand that while form is empty of existing inherently, form exists.
- "Emptiness is not other than form" tells us that, using the example of form, the emptiness of form is not of a different entity from the basis of that emptiness, form itself.
- "Form is also not other than emptiness" is saying that one cannot account for form that is of a different entity from its ultimate nature, its emptiness of existing inherently.

In the same way, one has to apply the four emptinesses to the rest of the aggregates—feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness. In the same way, they are all empty.

This paragraph shows the training in the perfection of wisdom on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation through reviewing the fourfold emptiness. As you will recall from our discussion on the paths and grounds, the realisation of emptiness on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation is via the meaning generality of emptiness. Emptiness is not realised directly.

### **TRAINING ON THE PATH OF SEEING**

The next paragraph shows the training in the perfection of wisdom on the path of seeing, when emptiness is realised directly.

Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness; without characteristic; unproduced, unceased; stainless, not without stain; not deficient, not fulfilled.

When all phenomena are elaborated into certain categories, we talk about the twelve sources and the eighteen elements<sup>2</sup> (or constituents). All phenomena are emptiness.

The eighteen elements are made up of:

- the six objects of observation of the six consciousnesses—the form element,

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<sup>2</sup> In these transcripts, "element" is used for consistency with the translation used in the sutra itself.

sound element, odour element, taste element, tangible object element and phenomenon element.

- the six inner elements or sense powers. The sense powers are the bases for generating the respective consciousnesses—the eye element, ear element, nose element, tongue element, body element and mental element.
- in dependence on the six objects and six sense powers, the six consciousnesses are produced—the eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mental consciousness.

| EIGHTEEN ELEMENTS      |                         |              |                |                 |                      |
|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Objects of observation |                         | Sense powers |                | Consciousnesses |                      |
| 1                      | Form element            | 1            | Eye element    | 1               | Eye consciousness    |
| 2                      | Sound element           | 2            | Ear element    | 2               | Ear consciousness    |
| 3                      | Odour element           | 3            | Nose element   | 3               | Nose consciousness   |
| 4                      | Taste element           | 4            | Tongue element | 4               | Tongue consciousness |
| 5                      | Tangible object element | 5            | Body element   | 5               | Body consciousness   |
| 6                      | Phenomenon element      | 6            | Mental element | 6               | Mental consciousness |

- “All phenomena are emptiness; ...”: The eighteen elements are all emptinesses.
- “... without characteristic; ...”: Phenomena are not established by way of their characteristics.
- “... unproduced ...”: All phenomena, such as form and so forth, are not produced inherently. They are only produced conventionally.
- “... unceased; ...”: All produced phenomena necessarily cease, but such cessation is not inherent cessation. They cease conventionally.

Phenomena that are produced from causes and conditions are not produced inherently. As there is no inherent production, therefore they are “unproduced.” Likewise any phenomena that is produced from causes and conditions have to cease but their cessation is not inherent cessation. Therefore they are “unceased.”

- “... stainless ...”: All defilements such as samsara and the causes of samsara do not exist inherently. Therefore they are stainless.
- “... not without stain ...”: The state of abandonment of the stain, nirvana, also does not exist inherently. So it is “not without stain.”
- “... not deficient, not fulfilled.”: These two are related to the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena and the class of thoroughly pure phenomena.

*The class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena* refer to the afflictions that decrease as one progresses on the path. Their reduction does not happen inherently. Similarly the increment of different qualities and the improvement of realisations that are included under *the class of thoroughly purified phenomena* do not exist inherently. Therefore the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena is not “deficient” and the class of thoroughly pure phenomena is “not fulfilled.”

The next paragraph deals with the path of meditation. We hope that we can finish this quickly.



*Question:* The bases of designation for a person are the aggregates. Therefore it is not emptiness. What should be posited as the bases of designation of the aggregates



themselves that likewise should not be emptiness? How does the basis of designation come into the picture between the imputed object and its emptiness?

*Answer:* It is easier to use the person as an example. We have seen that the bases of designation of the 'I' or person are the aggregates. The person is imputed in dependence upon the body and mind, the aggregates. The collection of the aggregates is the basis of imputation. So the five aggregates are the bases of designation for the person.

*Question:* Then what is the basis of designation for the body?

*Answer:* What is the basis of designation of our form aggregate? The basis of designation would have to be the collection of limbs—the legs, the hands, the torso, the head and so forth. If you remember the module on Shantideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* from the previous cycle of the Basic Program, there was an extensive discussion on, for example, what the hand is. That is part of the body.

If you were to ask, "What is the basis of designation of the hand?" then that would be the palm and the fingers. Then if you were to ask, "What are the fingers made up of?" you would have to go down to the level of the joints and so forth.

There was an extensive discussion in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*. As you go down each level, from the body down to the individual parts of the body, the individual parts of the body themselves are also made up of their own parts. At the atomic level, we can talk about particles and so forth. Those particles are also not established inherently. Such investigation reveals that the very concept of the whole is dependent on its parts and the parts make up the whole.

Therefore it is the uncommon assertion of the CMWS that all phenomena are dependently originated or dependently arisen. There is not a single existent that is not dependently originated. Dependently originated phenomena are necessarily not inherently existent.

*Question:* Where is the selflessness of persons explicitly referred to or taught in this sutra?

*Answer:* The sutra is talking about form and so forth. There does not seem to be any direct reference to the person or 'I'.

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.

The word "also" here is very important because what it means is that not only is the person empty of existing inherently, the aggregates themselves that are the bases of designation of the person, are also empty.

**Questions for discussion on Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2013**

1. Why is there the need to accumulate the collections over three great countless eons in order to achieve enlightenment?
2. Can one be reborn in the lower realms when one has the realisation of bodhicitta and emptiness?
3. Is a bodhisattva who has realised emptiness directly a Mahayana superior?
4. Why are the knowledge obscurations not divided into intellectually acquired and innate forms like the afflictions?
5. Does one necessarily have to realise emptiness before generating the bodhicitta that will enable one to enter the Mahayana path?
6. Is *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* spoken by the Buddha?

These are not questions where the answer is simply yes or no. Scriptural sources should be quoted where applicable and one should indicate one's line of reasoning for one's answer.

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