

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 8

18 July 2013

Reviewing the fourfold emptiness. Training on the path of meditation. Only emptiness appears in the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness

Question: How does one link the teachings here on the path of seeing, that the eighteen elements and so forth are empty of inherent nature to the teachings on the paths and grounds where the objects of abandonment of the Mahayana path of seeing are the intellectually acquired afflictive obscurations?

Answer: The paragraph that starts with “Form is empty. Emptiness is form... and consciousness are empty.” shows the training of the perfection of wisdom on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation.

The next section, “Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness; ... not fulfilled.” shows the eight features of emptiness on the path of seeing.

“... all phenomena are emptiness ...”: In the commentary, “all phenomena” are explained on the basis of the discussion of the eighteen elements or the twelve sources.

This will be apparent in the next section when we look at the training of the perfection of wisdom on the Mahayana path of meditation.

The main objects of abandonment on the ten grounds are the two obscurations:

1. afflictive obscurations
2. knowledge obscurations

There are two types of afflictive obscurations:

1. intellectually acquired afflictive obscurations
2. innate afflictive obscurations

As we saw in one of the earlier lessons, the intellectually acquired afflictive obscurations are abandoned on the path of seeing. Prior to achieving the path of seeing, one is not able to realise emptiness directly. When one perceives emptiness directly, one achieves the path of seeing. It is only when one achieves the path of seeing that one possesses in one’s hands an actual antidote to the conception or apprehension of true existence.

In *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, the paragraph that starts with “Shariputra, likewise, all phenomena are emptiness; ... not fulfilled.” talks about the eight features of emptiness.¹ Although this explanation is linked to or is explained in the context of the path of seeing, it is really difficult to find a reason why they should be explained in relation to the path of seeing and not somewhere else. What is so uncommon or peculiar about these eight features that they have to be related to the path of seeing? There does not seem to be any explanation for this. This is something that one has to think about.

It is the same with the fourfold emptiness (or the four empties). Using form as the basis of emptiness, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is also not other than emptiness.” Why must this be discussed in the context of the Mahayana path of accumulation and path of preparation and not elsewhere? This fourfold emptiness is applicable to all the paths as it talks about the nature of emptiness. So why is it there?

Likewise in the next paragraph, when you look at the Mahayana path of meditation, the discussion of the five aggregates is expanded into the twelve sources and the eighteen elements. Then it goes into the four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination and so forth. Why are these discussed in the context of the path of meditation when they are common to all the paths?

When you think about this, there does not seem to be any explanation or reason. It is just the way it is presented in the commentaries.

Khen Rinpoche: This is my question. I have this question in my mind but I don't know who to ask. The answer is not in the texts. Also my teacher is old so it is difficult to communicate. I read two, three different commentaries. I could not find an answer. The answer is not there, so I don't know.

Benny's question has something to do with what I just said. Why is it discussed in this context, linking the eight features to the intellectually acquired afflictions?

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## REVIEWING THE FOURFOLD EMPTINESS

In the sutra, form is used as the illustration, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form.” But it is not just about form. You have to think about different illustrations such as the ‘I’. So, “‘I’ is empty. Emptiness is ‘I’. Emptiness is not other than ‘I’; ‘I’ is also not other than emptiness.”

- “Form is empty.” Essentially form is the mere appearance to the mind or consciousness. Because form is a mere appearance to the mind, therefore it does not exist by way of its own nature. It does not exist inherently.

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<sup>1</sup> The eight features of emptiness are (1) emptiness, (2) without characteristic, (3) unproduced, (4) unceased, (5) stainless, (6) not without stain, (7) not deficient and (8) not fulfilled.

- “Emptiness is form.” Because form does not exist inherently, it is empty of existing inherently. Therefore form is a mere appearance to the mind and, “Emptiness is form.”
- “Emptiness is not other than form.” The very nature or entity of form is none other than its emptiness of existing inherently. Its emptiness of existing inherently is not a separate entity from form itself, the appearance of form. While form is empty of existing inherently, it exists as form, a mere appearance to the mind.
- “... form is also not other than emptiness.” The entity of form is not something separate or different from its emptiness.

Here form is used as the illustration in this presentation of the fourfold emptiness. When you substitute form with the person or ‘I’ and try to think about the ultimate nature of the ‘I’, the conclusion is that while the ‘I’ is empty of existing inherently, it functions. The ‘I’ exists and functions within its being empty of existing inherently.

The bases of designation of the ‘I’ are the aggregates. It is clear that when you look for the ‘I’ among the aggregates, you will not be able to find the ‘I’. The ‘I’ is none other than that which is merely imputed by a conventional valid cogniser in dependence upon the aggregates.

If the ‘I’ exists inherently, it should be findable. Where then do you look for the ‘I’? When you look for the ‘I’ on the aggregates, does the ‘I’ exist in or on the aggregates? Is the ‘I’ the aggregates themselves or is the ‘I’ a part of the aggregates?

You investigate. It should be very clear that when you look for the ‘I’ on the aggregates, such an ‘I’ cannot be found among the aggregates. Because it cannot be found, therefore the ‘I’ is empty.

When we think of ourselves, how do we exist? When we think of the ‘I’, how does it appear to us? It appears that the ‘I’ is the aggregates. Whether it is a specific aggregate or whether it is the collection of aggregates or it is the body and/or mind, we believe the ‘I’ is that. Isn’t there this appearance that it is somewhere? Not only is there this appearance, we firmly believe that the ‘I’ exists in the way it appears to us.

We have this appearance and this strong belief. What we have to check is this, “How exactly does the ‘I’ exist?” If it exists in the way we believe it to exist, then it should be findable. When we look for it, we should be able to find it. But even after a detailed investigation and analysis, the ‘I’ cannot be found.

The ‘I’ appears to be one with our body and mind. This is how it appears and this is what we think and believe. But if it is in this composite of the body and mind, it should be findable. If you were to engage a surgeon to cut you up and look for your ‘I’ among your body and mind, it should be findable. But even if you were to cut up this collection of aggregates into individual parts, you will not be able to find the ‘I’.

After such a detailed search, yet you are not able to find your ‘I’, what does it show? What does it mean? It shows that the ‘I’ does not exist from the side of the bases of designation, from the side of the body and mind, the aggregates. If the ‘I’ does not exist from the side of the aggregates, this means that the ‘I’ is none other than that

which is merely imputed *in dependence* on the aggregates.

When you cannot find the 'I' among the aggregates this shows clearly that the 'I' does not exist from the side of the aggregates. Although it does not exist from the side of the aggregates, it does not mean that the 'I' does not exist. The 'I' exists. The 'I' is a mere appearance to the mind—that which is merely imputed in dependence on the aggregates.

You can go back to the example of form. When you look for the inherently existent form, you cannot find it. While you cannot find the inherently existent form, it does not mean that form does not exist. Form exists. So what is form? It is none other than that which is a mere appearance to the mind.

So this is what you can reflect on when you recite, "Emptiness is form"; that it is empty of existing inherently so it is in the nature of emptiness. While it is empty, it exists. So form arises from emptiness.

This is extremely challenging. It is not something that you can understand instantly. You have to regularly reflect on and think about this. So start with this fourfold emptiness. You can use different illustrations such as form or the 'I' and so forth. Try to understand them by using the fourfold emptiness. You can also try to understand this on the bases of the analogies that we had discussed recently.

### **TRAINING ON THE PATH OF MEDITATION**

The next paragraph relates to the path of meditation, starting from:

Shariputra, therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no visual form, no sound, no odour, no taste, no object of touch and no phenomenon. There is no eye element and so on up to and including no mind element and no mental consciousness element. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance and so on up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly, there is no suffering, origination, cessation, and path; there is no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

#### *Twelve sources*

- "Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness": This is talking about the emptiness of inherent existence of the five aggregates.
- "... no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind": These are the six sense powers. "... no visual form, no sound, no odour, no taste, no object of touch, and no phenomenon." These are the six objects. The six objects and six sense powers constitute the twelve sources.

| <b>FIVE AGGREGATES AND THE TWELVE SOURCES</b> |   |                       |
|-----------------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| <b>Five aggregates</b>                        | 1 | form                  |
|                                               | 2 | feeling               |
|                                               | 3 | discrimination        |
|                                               | 4 | compositional factors |
|                                               | 5 | consciousness         |
| <b>Six sources (six sense powers)</b>         | 1 | eye source            |
|                                               | 2 | ear source            |
|                                               | 3 | nose source           |
|                                               | 4 | tongue source         |
|                                               | 5 | body source           |
|                                               | 6 | mental source         |
| <b>Six objects</b>                            | 1 | form source           |
|                                               | 2 | sound source          |
|                                               | 3 | odour source          |
|                                               | 4 | taste source          |
|                                               | 5 | tangible source       |
|                                               | 6 | phenomenon source     |

*Eighteen elements*

- “There is no eye element and so on up to and including no mind element ...” refer to the six sources or sense powers.
- “... and no mental consciousness element.” refer to the six consciousnesses.

The six sense powers and the six consciousnesses are explicitly stated. But what is also implied in the meaning is the six objects, the form element, sound element and so forth. So the eighteen elements are:

- the six sense powers
- the six consciousnesses
- the six objects

The twelve sources are not separate from the eighteen elements.

*Twelve links of dependent origination*

“There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death.” This is talking about the twelve links of dependent origination in the forward and reverse processes.

The twelve links of dependent origination<sup>2</sup> are:

1. ignorance
2. compositional activity
3. consciousness
4. name and form
5. six sources
6. contact
7. feeling
8. craving
9. grasping

<sup>2</sup> Khen Rinpoche’s teachings on the twelve links of dependent origination can be found in lessons 46 and 47 of Module 1 on the *Middle Length Lam-Rim*. Both the audio and edited transcripts can be downloaded from this link: [http://www.fpmtabc.org/teachings\\_files/bp2ndM1.php](http://www.fpmtabc.org/teachings_files/bp2ndM1.php)

10. potential existence
11. birth
12. aging and death.

The twelve links of dependent origination can be discussed in the forward order or the reverse order. In this way, it is linked to the discussion on the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena and the class of the thoroughly purified phenomena.

In the forward order<sup>3</sup>, the twelve links of dependent origination starts with ignorance. Because of ignorance, there is compositional activity, i.e., one accumulates throwing karma (or propelling/projecting karma) and the imprint of that action is imprinted on the consciousness and so forth:

Ignorance → compositional activity → consciousness → name and form → six sources → contact → feeling → craving → grasping → potential existence → birth → aging and death.

When you look at the reverse order, if you were asked, “Where do aging and death come from?”:

- Aging and death comes from birth.
- Birth comes from potential existence.
- Potential existence comes from grasping.
- Grasping comes from craving.
- Craving is preceded by feeling.
- Feeling is preceded by contact.
- Contact is preceded by the six sources.
- The six sources are preceded by name and form.
- Name and form is preceded consciousness.
- Consciousness is preceded by compositional activity.
- Compositional activity comes from ignorance.

*Khen Rinpoche: You must know this. Can you say this quickly?*

All these show how the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena arises. This is how we circle in samsara. You can look at the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena in the forward order or in the reverse order.

You can do likewise with the class of thoroughly purified phenomena. In terms of the forward order:

- When ignorance ceases, compositional activity ceases.
- When compositional activity ceases, the link of consciousness ceases.
- When the link of consciousness ceases, the link of name and form ceases, and so forth, leading to the cessation of birth.
- When birth ceases then there is no aging and death.

This is the forward order in terms of the class of thoroughly purified phenomena.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Forward order’ is the meaning translation. The literal translation is ‘a reason from scripture’.

What about the reverse order of the class of thoroughly purified phenomena?

- Aging and death does not exist if birth does not exist.
- Birth will not exist when there is no potential existence.
- Potential existence will not exist when there is no grasping.
- Grasping will not exist when there is no craving.
- And so forth all the way up to no projecting karma, the link of compositional activity.
- In order to stop projecting karma, you have to stop ignorance. So in order for there to be no compositional activity, there has to be no ignorance

This is the reverse order of the thoroughly purified phenomena.

“There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death.” This shows that both the forward and reverse orders of the twelve links of dependent origination are empty of existing inherently.

“Similarly, there is no suffering, origination, cessation, and path; there is no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.”

- This shows that the four noble truths do not exist inherently.
- The exalted wisdom directly perceiving emptiness does not exist inherently.
- Attainment and the qualities to be attained also do not exist inherently.

### **ONLY EMPTINESS APPEARS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WISDOM DIRECTLY PERCEIVING EMPTINESS**

“... in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination ...”: This is saying that what are mentioned here do not exist inherently. But from another angle, it is also saying that, from the perspective of the superior’s meditative equipoise focusing on emptiness, “... there is no form, no feeling ...” and so forth. In the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, nothing appears and nothing exists except emptiness. Only emptiness appears or exists in the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.

Because nothing appears in the perspective of this wisdom directly perceiving emptiness other than emptiness, therefore in the perspective of this mind, there is “... no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness,” i.e., the five aggregates, do not appear. Then the twelve sources do not appear. When further elaborated, the eighteen elements do not appear, the four noble truths do not appear and at the very end, even the exalted wisdom itself does not appear. What appears is only emptiness.

Only emptiness appears in the perspective of the wisdom of the meditative equipoise directly perceiving emptiness. The wisdom directly perceiving emptiness is a mind in which all dualistic appearances have subsided. In the last module, we talked about dualistic appearances:

1. There is no appearance of true existence.
2. There is no appearance of conventional phenomena.
3. There is no appearance of subject and object as distinct entities.

In the perspective of this wisdom of meditative equipoise directly realising emptiness, the four noble truths do not appear. Does true cessation appear? According to the CMWS, is emptiness true cessation or not? Among the four Buddhist tenets, how many tenets assert that true cessation is emptiness?

*Khen Rinpoche: How many? Quick, quick. Two, three or four? Right or wrong doesn't matter.*

*Student: The GES and CMWS.*

*Khen Rinpoche: Where in the GES does it say that true cessation is emptiness?*

The MOS and the CMWS assert that true cessation is emptiness and for the CMWS, true cessation is necessarily emptiness. According to the sutra here, in the perspective of the wisdom of meditative equipoise directly perceiving emptiness, the four noble truths do not appear. If the four noble truths do not appear, it follows that true cessation does not appear. But isn't true cessation not emptiness? If true cessation is emptiness, it follows that emptiness does not appear to the perspective of this mind. Then what are you going to say?

In the commentary of *The Heart of the Perfection Sutra*, during the training in the perfection of wisdom in the context of the path of meditation, one meditates on the emptinesses of the five aggregates, twelve sources, the eighteen elements, the four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination and so forth.

By training in the perfection of wisdom on the path of accumulation, path of preparation, path of seeing and path of meditation, this is how one achieves enlightenment.

Shariputra, therefore, because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on and dwell in the perfection of wisdom, the mind without obscuration and without fear. Having completely passed beyond error, they reach the end-point of nirvana.

By meditating on the emptiness of inherent existence of the following phenomena, the mind becomes free of obscurations:

1. five aggregates
2. twelve sources
3. eighteen elements
4. twelve links of dependent origination
5. four noble truths
6. exalted wisdom
7. attainment
8. non-attainment

By meditating on the emptiness of inherent existence, one eliminates the defilements and the obscurations. By meditating and familiarising oneself with the emptiness of inherent existence, the mind is "without obscuration." In some commentaries, it is stated that this means one is free of the obscuration of the apprehension of true



existence. In other commentaries, *obscuration* refers to the two types of obscuration.

Then one is “without fear” and achieves the state of “having completely passed beyond error.” “... without fear.”: In some commentaries it is explained that one is free of the fear of emptiness. In other commentaries, it is explained that one becomes fearless by overcoming the four erroneous views.

All the buddhas who dwell in the three times also manifestly, completely awoken to unsurpassable, perfect, complete enlightenment in reliance on the perfection of wisdom.

“All the buddhas who dwell in the three times ...”: All the buddhas of the past, present and future come about by depending on the practice of the perfection of wisdom, the direct perception of emptiness.

From the material we have just covered and from what we covered in the module on tenets, the conclusion is that without realising the ultimate nature of reality, emptiness, it is not possible to achieve full enlightenment. From the perspective of the highest school, the CMWS, setting aside full enlightenment, one needs to realise emptiness just to achieve liberation from cyclic existence, i.e., to achieve the state of the hearer foe destroyers or solitary realiser foe destroyers.

All of you have to figure out for yourself and be certain of the reasons why even the hearers and solitary realisers need to realise the emptiness of inherent existence in order to achieve liberation from samsara. You must know why, according to the CMWS, one must realise subtle selflessness in order to achieve even the liberation from samsara.

Why is it insufficient just to realise selflessness in an incomplete way, i.e., realising coarse selflessness? You have to think about this in detail. You have to know this. You must be convinced thoroughly, from your own side, that realising the emptiness of inherent existence—we are talking here about subtle emptiness—is so important to achieve any of these nirvanas, whether it be liberation or full enlightenment?

When the sutra says “All the buddhas who dwell in the three times also manifestly, completely awoken to unsurpassable, perfect, complete enlightenment in reliance on the perfection of wisdom,” it is saying that anyone who has become a buddha did so by directly realising subtle emptiness, the emptiness of inherent existence. This is the perfection of wisdom. Therefore all the buddhas of the future will have to achieve enlightenment by relying on this perfection of wisdom. In this context, the *perfection of wisdom* in this sentence refers to the path perfection of wisdom, the mind realising emptiness in general. By depending on that, one achieves enlightenment.

If you were asked, “If it is a mind realising emptiness, is it necessarily a perfection of wisdom?” The answer is no.

If you were then asked, “If it is a wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, is it necessarily a perfection of wisdom?” The answer is also no.

In order to be a perfection of wisdom, it has to be a mind realising emptiness in the continuum of a Mahayanist. The perfection of wisdom is a bodhisattva deed or bodhisattva conduct. In order for something to be a bodhisattva deed or conduct, it has to be conjoined with the Mahayana mind generation. So the perfection of wisdom is a mind realising emptiness that is conjoined with a Mahayana mind generation.

We had seen earlier how the perfection of wisdom can be divided into four<sup>4</sup>:

1. natural perfection of wisdom
2. textual perfection of wisdom
3. path perfection of wisdom
4. resultant perfection of wisdom

Of the four, the “perfection of wisdom” mentioned here is the path perfection of wisdom that is the mind realising emptiness that is conjoined with the Mahayana mind generation.

If we do not finish *The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* in the next lesson, we will definitely finish it in the lesson after that.

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<sup>4</sup> The etymological divisions of the perfection of wisdom were discussed in lesson 5.