

## **Transcript of the oral commentary by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on Maitreya’s *Sublime Continuum of the Mahayana, Chapter One: The Tathagata Essence***

**Root verses** from *The Tathagata Essence: Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime Continuum Differentiating the Lineage of the Three Jewels (mahayanottaratantra-ratnagoatravibhanga)* by Maitreya, translation Jeffrey Hopkins and Joe B. Wilson, Draft, January 2007, © Hopkins and Wilson, with permission for use in FPMT Basic Programs

Oral commentary based on Gyaltsab Je’s Commentary to the First Chapter, translated by Gavin Kilty (*The Tathagata Essence, Commentary to the First Chapter* by Gyaltsap Darma Rinchen © FPMT, Inc. January 2007)

### **Lesson 1**

**3 February 2015**

---

Why we need to understand dependent arising. Story of Arya Asanga. Meaning of the title of the root text. Chapter One: The Essence of a One Gone Thus. Verse 1.

---

#### **WHY WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND DEPENDENT ARISING**

In *Dependent Arising: A Praise of the Buddha*, Lama Tsongkhapa said:

Having seen the truth, you taught it.  
Those following you will leave all troubles far behind,  
for they will cut to the root of every fault.

In this composition, Lama Tsongkhapa is praising the Buddha as someone who sees directly both the ultimate and conventional nature of all phenomena and has understood correctly the principles of dependent arising (or dependent origination). He praises the Buddha for this excellent presentation of dependent arising and, in particular, his detailed explanation of subtle dependent arising.

In the verse quoted above, Lama Tsongkhapa is saying this, “If I were to follow correctly what you, the Buddha, has taught in relation to subtle dependent arising, if I were to listen to the teachings on this subject, reflect on their meaning and familiarise my mind with whatever I have ascertained, then I would be able to leave all my troubles behind.” “Troubles” here include the suffering of all future lives; for example, being reborn in the hells and so forth. It also includes all the suffering of cyclic existence.

So Lama Tsongkhapa is telling us that if someone were to follow correctly the teachings of subtle dependent arising and realise them, then she would be able to free herself of all problems and sufferings. Why is this so? For she “will cut to the root of every fault.” That is, when someone is able to understand correctly the meaning of

subtle dependent arising, she will be able to eradicate the root of every single problem, the ignorance that mistakenly apprehends a self.

This is something that we must understand for ourselves. This is the reason why we listen to the teachings, why we familiarise our minds with the teachings, why we reflect on the teachings and why we meditate on the teachings.

In order to reflect and then meditate on the teachings, first we must know what the teachings are. We do this through hearing the teachings.

The root of every single problem, difficulty and suffering, such as the sufferings of birth, sickness, aging, death and so forth, lies in our ignorance, our apprehension of a self. The only antidote to this ignorance is to realise emptiness by understanding subtle dependent arising. Through our understanding of subtle dependent arising, we arrive at the realisation of emptiness, the mode of apprehending the person and reality that is completely opposite to and directly contradicts the mode of apprehension of our ignorance. When this happens, our ignorance, our mistaken apprehension of a self, can be weakened over time.

This is an essential point that we have to sort out for ourselves. We have to think about it. We have to understand how the realisation of emptiness that is achieved by understanding subtle dependent arising contradicts ignorance directly. When we are able to see that for ourselves, then we will feel that there can really be an end to all our problems. There can be an end to our samsara. When we then talk about nirvana or liberation from all suffering, we feel that such a thing exists and is really possible.

As Lama Tsongkhapa said,

Having seen the truth, you taught it.  
Those following you will leave all troubles far behind,  
for they will cut to the root of every fault.

This is the main goal behind our learning the teachings of the Buddha and why we reflect and put them into practice, i.e., to understand the crucial points of subtle dependent arising. Through that we can overcome all our faults and problems. This is really a very important point.

In order to be able to see for ourselves the truth behind this verse, we need a reasonable understanding of dependent arising and, in particular, a reasonable understanding of subtle dependent arising. We need to have some experience, some feeling internally of how, through an understanding of subtle dependent arising, there is at least a slight weakening of our ignorance. When we have some experience of this, then enthusiasm will arise and that will spur us on to continue our quest on this path.

With such an experience, we will develop a very special kind of faith and trust in the Buddha. So we really need to taste and feel the teachings for ourselves. This can only come about through reflection. Once you get some experience and have tasted the teachings in this way, then the enthusiasm and yearning for the teachings will naturally arise. Until you have tasted the teachings, no matter how much studying or

reflection you may have done, it is quite difficult to have a sustained enthusiasm to carry on with your practice. So this is a very important point. You really have to taste the teachings for yourself and that has to come from reflecting on the teachings.

If we were to reflect well on the meaning of this verse, it is said that, “Those following you will leave all troubles behind,” i.e., we will gradually leave all our problems far behind when we have a taste of or an experience of subtle dependent arising.

Why is this so? Because the understanding of subtle dependent arising is the *only* antidote to our ignorance, the apprehension of a self. This is the root of every single problem. We need to think about this because without thinking about it, we will not see how this is so. The more we think about it, the more we will come to see how this is so. Then we will come to realise that in this world, only the Buddha—and nobody else—had taught dependent arising.

Lama Tsongkhapa continues,

Those, however, outside your teachings,  
though they practice long and hard,  
are those who beckoned back faults,  
for they are welded to views of self.

There are many religious traditions in this world, each with their own founders. Many of them teach people to be ethical. There are instructions or advice from these religious traditions to avoid harming others through the practice of giving up the ten non-virtues. There are also some religious traditions that teach the achievement of various elevated states of concentration and so forth.

Although this is the case, if we were to think about this deeply, practising these teachings alone and achieving those various practices really do not bring about much benefit. Such practices alone do nothing at all to our ignorance. They do not harm the ego or our ignorance at all. No matter what we do, as long as the ego or our ignorance, which is our mistaken apprehension of a self, is still there and is not harmed, since ignorance is the root of all the other misconceptions, faults and mistakes, then our faults will always be there. We will always possess faults and we will always make mistakes. In fact, when we are not careful, sometimes these so-called practices seem to only increase our ignorance and our ego.

If one doesn't understand well the presentation of dependent origination, then what will happen? As Lama Tsongkhapa said, “... though they practice long and hard, /are those who beckoned back faults.” Such practitioners may be very sincere, trying very hard and working at whatever practices for a very long time but these practices will only bring back faults over and over again. Why? Because they are still “welded to views of self.”

Then Lama Tsongkhapa goes on to say,

Ah! When the wise sees the difference,  
how could they not revere you  
from the very depths of their hearts!

As a Buddhist, we have devotion and faith in and respect for Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of the Dharma of this world. But we should understand and see for ourselves why he deserves such respect. Why is he so different from founders of other religious traditions? What makes him so special? What makes him stand out?

When you think about his presentation of subtle dependent arising, you will then come to understand that the Buddha was not someone who simply taught a path that led to a temporary elimination of faults. The Buddha was someone who has shown the path to the total and permanent eradication of all faults and mistakes through the eradication of the root of those faults and mistakes. Lama Tsongkhapa is saying that the wise who understand those points that I had just brought up are the ones who would respect the Buddha from the very depths of their hearts.

~~~~~

There is a collection of texts called the five treatises that were attributed to Maitreya Buddha. The text that we are going to study is one of these treatises called the *Uttaratantra* or the *Sublime Continuum*.

Before Shakyamuni Buddha manifested appearing in this world, in the pure land of Tushita, he enthroned Maitreya Buddha as his regent. After enthroning Maitreya Buddha as his regent, he then manifested being born in this world, achieving enlightenment and so forth.

In the future, Maitreya Buddha, the fifth of the 1000 buddhas, will descend into this world during this fortunate eon. According to some scholars, they assert that Maitreya is a buddha while others assert that Maitreya is a tenth ground bodhisattva.

How did the five treatises attributed to Maitreya appear in this world? These teachings were made available in this world through Arya Asanga. About 900 years after the parinirvana of Shakyamuni Buddha, Arya Asanga appeared in this world. He received these teachings directly from Maitreya Buddha, and it was him who disseminated these teachings in this world. Arya Asanga was also the trailblazer of the Mind Only School.

### **STORY OF ARYA ASANGA**

I will tell you a short story about Arya Asanga. When Arya Asanga was born, he was taken care of primarily by his mother. His mother taught him the various traditional arts and sciences.

One day, he asked his mother, “What does my father do?”

His mother told him, “The purpose of my giving birth to you is not for you to follow in your father’s footsteps. Rather my motivation is for you to help with the teachings of the Buddha because these teachings are in decline. I hope you will bring extensive benefit to the teachings of the Buddha.” His mother then encouraged him to give up the lay life and become a monk.

It is said that the mother of Arya Asanga was not an ordinary person. She was someone who was blessed and guided by Chenrezig. She wanted to revive the Buddha's teachings that were in decline. At that time, because of the prevailing social norms, on the basis of being a woman, she knew she wouldn't be able to do much for the teachings of the Buddha. Therefore she thought of giving birth to a son who could work for the teachings of the Buddha. With that motivation, she got married to a person of royal lineage and gave birth to Arya Asanga.

Arya Asanga grew up, took full ordination and became a gelong. He then engaged in the study of the teachings for five years. It was said that every year, he was able to internalise 100,000 verses of the teachings. He was not only able to internalise the words of these verses but also their meanings.

Arya Asanga then engaged in hearing and reflecting on the teachings of the Buddha, focussing primarily on the three scriptural collections, the Tripitaka. In particular, he had great interest in wanting to understand the extremely difficult points of the teachings on the perfection of wisdom, in particular, the hidden meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras. He really wanted to understand those teachings.

He decided to rely on a particular buddha that will help him to achieve his wish. He checked and discovered that if he was to engage in and accomplish the practice of Maitreya Buddha, he would be able to receive the teachings that will allow him to fathom the extremely difficult to fathom meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras.

It is said that he entered into retreat for twelve years focussing on Maitreya Buddha. Many of you may have heard of this story. After the first three years, not to mention seeing Maitreya Buddha, he didn't even get any sign of having some contact with Maitreya Buddha. He got discouraged and decided to end his retreat. But something happened that made him enter into retreat again. But the same thing happened after the sixth year and the ninth year. Finally, at the end of the twelfth year, not only had he not seen Maitreya Buddha, he had not even achieved any good signs. So he was very discouraged and decided to give up. Because he had not gotten any sign of seeing Maitreya Buddha after twelve years in retreat, he ended his retreat.

One day, he saw a dog that was suffering from a serious injury with its wound infested with maggots. He generated great compassion for that dog. As a result of generating great compassion for that sick dog, he purified much of his negativities and obscurations. There and then, that sick dog suddenly appeared as Maitreya Buddha. As a result of the purification of his negativities and obscurations due to his great compassion arising for the sick dog, in place of the sick dog, he saw Maitreya Buddha.

When he saw Maitreya Buddha, he told Maitreya Buddha, "I tried so hard for twelve years. Where were you? I didn't even see you." When Arya Asanga said this to Maitreya Buddha, he wept because he was so discouraged.

Maitreya Buddha said to him, "No matter how much rain may fall on the ground, if there is no seed, nothing will grow. You did not see me during those twelve years because of your obscurations. In fact, I was there all along. Because of your great

compassion arising for that sick dog, your obscurations were purified and now you are able to see me.”

Arya Asanga had been in retreat for twelve years. He had endured much hardship through his meditations and recitations and that, combined with the arising of great compassion for the sick dog, the obscurations that prevented him from seeing Maitreya Buddha were finally purified.

Maitreya Buddha asked him, “Now that you see me, what do you want from me?”

Arya Asanga replied, “My wish is to disseminate and to spread the Mahayana teachings.”

Maitreya Buddha told Arya Asanga, “If that is what you want, hold on to my robes.”

Arya Asanga held on to the robes of Maitreya Buddha who then took him to the pure land of Tushita. In some accounts, it is said that Arya Asanga stayed in the Tushita pure land for fifty human years. Another account states that he was there for twenty-five human years. But whatever the case may be, whether it was fifty years or twenty-five years, during that time, he listened to teachings from Maitreya Buddha, particularly the five treatises of Maitreya Buddha. He listened to those teachings and was able to retain all those teachings in his mind. During that time, it was said that he also accomplished the attainment of the dharani of non-forgetfulness.

*Khen Rinpoche: We need that!*

Arya Asanga then came back to this world. Gradually he wrote down the teachings that he had heard from Maitreya Buddha and then disseminated them in this world. These five treatises from Maitreya Buddha clarified the hidden meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras.

During the lifetime of Arya Asanga, there was a king who recited the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* daily. When he heard about Arya Asanga, he thought, “If he is really an arya being, a superior being, he must be able to read the minds of others. Let me check him out.”

He summoned many teachers and a great assembly of Sangha. He gathered them with the intention of checking whether Arya Asanga was clairvoyant and able to read the minds of others. The king thought, “If Arya Asanga could read the minds of others, I would treat him well. Otherwise, I would put him down.”

The king had a buffalo painted white and locked it up in the house. In a golden vase, he filled the bottom half of the vase with excrement and all kinds of filth and the upper half with honey. Then he asked Arya Asanga, “What is in the house and what is in this vase?” There is an account of how Arya Asanga answered the king. The king also asked Arya Asanga questions from the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.

The king was very impressed with Arya Asanga’s answers and developed great faith in Arya Asanga. From then on, Arya Asanga became very famous.

The five treatises of Maitreya Buddha were also disseminated widely. There are also historical accounts of Arya Asanga going to Central India. There are accounts of him founding many Dharma communities and monasteries and so forth. In the later part of his life, he also became the abbot of Nalanda monastery for twelve years.

One of the lessons that we can draw from this short account of Arya Asanga's life is that if we really want to achieve something—in this case, understanding the Buddha's teachings well—then you need to work very hard and endure the difficulties that arise. This is one lesson that we should draw from his life story.

The fact that we have this opportunity to meet these five treatises of Maitreya Buddha, such as the *Uttaratantra* or the *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutra*, is really due to the kindness of Arya Asanga. It is through the kindness of Maitreya Buddha and Arya Asanga that these teachings exist in this world. These teachings have been preserved uninterruptedly over many centuries and we now have the opportunity to come into contact with these texts. Not only that, we have the opportunity to examine the words and meanings of these texts and the opportunity to gain a reasonable understanding of these texts. All this is made possible through their kindness.

~~~~~

#### MEANING OF THE TITLE OF THE ROOT TEXT

The title of this root text in English is *The Tathagata Essence, the Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime Continuum*.

“The Great Vehicle” here is the Mahayana. When we talk about the vehicle, they can be classified into the causal vehicle and the resultant (or effect) vehicle. Here we are primarily referring to the perspective of the resultant (or effect) vehicle. The “yana” in Mahayana refers to the vehicle or platform that can deliver us to the resultant (or effect) stage of buddhahood.

When we talk about “yana,” we can either talk about the vehicle in the sense of:

- the result (effect) that we will achieve, our final destination or
- the vehicle or platform that will bring us there.

Here, I think, primarily it has to do with the Mahayana path which is the vehicle that can bring us to the result, full enlightenment.

This is a Mahayana treatise on the sublime continuum. Continuum in English is *gyu* in Tibetan or *tantra* in Sanskrit. This is an explanation of the tathagata essence which is commonly translated and referred to as buddha potential or buddha nature, but it is more accurate to use the term, tathagata essence.

The tathagata essence continues uninterruptedly forever. As it has always been there, this is the meaning behind the word, “continuum.” The tathagata essence exists at the time of the basis, it exists at the time of the path when one is travelling towards buddhahood, and at the time of full enlightenment, the tathagata essence is also there.

When we talk about the expressions, “the clear light nature of the mind,” “the factor of clarity and awareness (or knowing)” or “the mind’s emptiness of true existence,” all these exist uninterruptedly in a continuum forever:

- at the time of the basis when one is sentient being
- at the time of the path when one is travelling towards enlightenment
- at the time of the result, i.e., full enlightenment when one becomes a buddha

But they are called different names at different stages of one’s development because the basis for these attributes are different. The basis for these attributes differs at the time of the basis, at the time of the path and at the time of the result.

“Sublime” is *uttara* in Sanskrit and *la na me pa* in Tibetan. In English, it literally means unexcelled, i.e., there is nothing higher than this. In what way then is this text unexcelled? There are different ways to explain this.

- One explanation is that because the subject matter of this particular treatise is the seven vajra (or diamond) topics, this text is unexcelled and there is nothing higher than this.
- According to Gyaltsab Je, one of the main disciples of Lama Tsongkhapa, the meaning of “sublime” means “at a later time.” Here “later” refers to the third turning of the wheel of Dharma. I’m not exactly sure about this but perhaps what Gyaltsab Je is trying to say is that this treatise, the *Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime Continuum*, is a text that comments on the teachings belonging to the third turning of the wheel of Dharma.

The Sanskrit for the word “treatise” is *shastra*, a word that brings *shasa* and *traya* together. *Shasa* has the connotation, ‘to amend, to fix or to change’ and *traya* has the connotation, ‘to rescue, to save, to protect.’ As such, when you put the two words together, then the meaning of treatise or *shastra* is something that cures us of our afflictions and protects us from the suffering of the lower realms and the suffering of cyclic existence in general. As such, for a text to be a Buddhist treatise, its subject matter must perform these two functions: (1) it must be able to cure us of our afflictions and (2) it must be able to protect us from the fears of the lower realms and cyclic existence in general.

Sanskrit	Tibetan	English
<i>Mahayanuttaratantrashastra</i>	<i>Thekpa Chenpo Gyu Lamä Tenchö</i>	<i>Mahayana Sublime Continuum</i>
<i>uttara</i>	<i>la na me pa</i>	sublime which can mean (1) unexcelled or (2) at a later time, i.e., referring to the third turning of the wheel of Dharma
<i>tantra</i>	<i>gyu</i>	continuum
<i>shastra</i>	<i>tenchö</i>	treatise, i.e., a text whose subject matter can (1) cure us of our afflictions and (2) protect us from the suffering of the lower realms and the suffering of cyclic existence.

### *Chapter One: The Essence of a One Gone Thus*

Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.



The text starts with, “Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.” This is a verse of homage by the *lotsawa*, the translator who translated this text from Sanskrit into Tibetan. There are many reasons why the translators of the past always paid homage at the beginning of their works. One reason is that whenever one engages in an activity like this, it has to be conjoined with refuge. So whatever practices we do, our practices should be conjoined with the mind of refuge.

Likewise, when the translators of the past first embarked on any translation work, they would go for refuge to the Three Jewels. Through the act of paying homage, the merit created would help to ensure that the translation project would be successfully completed without any obstacles along the way.

#### Verse 1

Buddha, doctrine, community, basic constituent, enlightenment,  
Qualities, and finally, Buddha activities—  
The body of the entire treatise is in brief  
These seven diamond topics.

The subject matter of this treatise is the seven vajra (or diamond) topics. The number of vajra topics is definite. It is seven.

The seven vajra topics or the seven essential points are indicated in the first two lines of Verse 1:

1. Buddha
2. Doctrine
3. Community
4. Basic constituent
5. Enlightenment
6. Qualities
7. Buddha activities

Of the seven, we will cover only the first four: Buddha, doctrine, community and basic constituent.

These seven vajra topics or essential points are treated from two perspectives—from the conventional perspective and from the ultimate perspective.

There is also a discussion on the order of these seven vajra essential points, i.e., basically why they are ordered in this way. We may look into this on Thursday.

~~~~~

*Question:* You mentioned that the continuum of the clear light mind exists during the basis and during the path until enlightenment. Can I then assume that this clear light mind is a permanent phenomenon? If it is not a permanent phenomenon, what are the changes that occur?

*Answer:* The factor of clarity and awareness of the mind exists all the time. It has always been there. It exists at the time of the basis, in the present moment. It continues to exist when one enters the path and it will continue to exist even after

one has achieved enlightenment. In that sense, that continuum is eternal—it has always existed and it will always exist *but* its nature or entity is impermanent.

The ‘I’ or the person who is imputed in dependence on the five aggregates has always been there. It will always exist even when one has achieved enlightenment. It has always been there and it will always be there. In that sense it is eternal. But the ‘I’ or the person is always changing. The nature or entity of the person is impermanent. While it exists forever, it is impermanent.

Think about the smallest possible atomic particles that aggregate to form and take the shape of different objects. I don’t think these particles will ever come to an end. They have always been there and they will never cease to exist. They will continue to exist forever. I think that the most fundamental basic building block of matter, these smallest particles, would probably exist forever.

The natural ability of the mind to understand and comprehend objects and events — for objects to appear to the mind and for the mind to be aware of them—this factor of clarity and awareness cannot be permanent. If it is permanent, then you cannot explain how it undergoes changes, how it experiences things and how it thinks differently at different times.

Likewise, although the person has always existed and will forever exist, yet the person, the ‘I’, is not permanent. If the ‘I’ is permanent, how then do you explain that sometimes the ‘I’ experiences happiness and, at other times, experiences suffering and feels sad? How would you explain that? Obviously there is an ‘I’ or ‘me’ who is suffering or who is happy. We have to account for such an ‘I’. This is especially since we have to be able to account for how an ‘I’ or person can come from a previous life and we have to account for how this ‘I’ moves on to a future life.

According to non-Buddhist traditions that assert reincarnation, there must be something that endures from life to life, that moves from the previous life to this life and then from this life to the next life. There is this person who must remain and who doesn’t change. These non-Buddhists philosophers who accept reincarnation apply their own reasoning and they conclude that such a person must be permanent and unchanging. The lives may be different but the ‘I’ or the person who moves from life to life must be the same and therefore must be unchanging. This is the position of some non-Buddhist traditions.

In Buddhism, we refute the existence of a permanent ‘I’. The ‘I’ who is the experiencer of happiness and suffering cannot be unchanging. If it is unchanging, then how can it experience happiness one day and suffering the next? But although such an ‘I’ or person is impermanent and undergoes change, nevertheless the continuum of the ‘I’ is eternal.

Likewise, when we talk about the factor of the clarity and awareness of the mind or the mind’s emptiness of true existence, that factor of clarity and awareness is impermanent and undergoes change, but its continuum, its very existence, is eternal.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Patricia Lee & Julia Koh; edited by Cecilia Tsong.