

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-ratnagotravibhanga)* 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 3

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The four reliances. Manifest and hidden phenomena. Review: The basis, the path and the result. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verse 1-2. Why seven vajra topics? Alternative presentation. Explanation of the term, 'vajra topic'.

THE FOUR RELIANCES

The Buddha had advised us that we should not accept whatever he said simply out of respect for him, "Oh, this was said by the Buddha." Rather, the Buddha said that we should check and investigate thoroughly whether what he said accords with how things really are, whether he speaks the truth. Only then should we adopt his teachings and put them into practice.

If there is a need to investigate his teachings, how should we go about doing it? There must be a structure governing such analysis, which is based on the four reliances:

1. Do not rely on the person but rather rely on the Dharma.
2. Do not rely on the words but rather rely on their meaning.
3. Do not rely on the interpretative meaning but rather rely on the definitive meaning.
4. Do not rely on the ordinary mind but rather rely on wisdom.

1. Do not rely on the person but rather rely on the Dharma

"Do not rely on the person" means to not simply follow the person just because he is famous or he has many followers, but rather to examine what he has said or his teachings. If they are worthwhile, then take them up and adopt them.

2. Do not rely on the words but rather rely on their meaning

“Do not rely on the words” means to not simply trust whatever is said because it sounds good or if it was delivered in a very charismatic way with very nice pleasantries, but rather to examine the meaning behind what is said.

If the subject matter, the meaning behind the words, is worthwhile and correct, only then you should adopt it. In the context here, we are talking about the Dharma so even if the presentation is not very pleasant or the words used are not very poetic but if they convey the correct meaning of what one should abandon and what one should adopt, then we should put them into practice.

But if the meaning does not accurately convey what one needs to abandon and what one needs to adopt, then no matter how appealing the presentation may be, it would not benefit us.

3. Do not rely on the interpretative meaning but rather rely on the definitive meaning.

“Do not rely on the interpretative meaning” means to not just look at the words literally, i.e., do not just follow after the words but rather to examine their ultimate meaning or the ultimate intent behind the words. We should look for the main point.

4. Do not rely on the ordinary mind but rather rely on wisdom

“Do not rely on the ordinary mind” means to not rely just on hearing and reflection, but rather we should attempt to generate an experience of the teachings that comes from the meditation familiarising the mind with the topic. Ideally, we should work at having a direct experience of the teachings in question.

Whatever result is achieved through simply hearing and reflecting on the teachings is not stable. Stability only comes through familiarisation and tasting the teachings for yourself. Once you have experienced and tasted the teachings, then that is something worthwhile and trustworthy that you can rely on. The main point is that we need to be able to elicit an experience of the teachings for ourselves. This is what we should place our hopes and trust in, our own valid experience.

MANIFEST AND HIDDEN PHENOMENA

Since investigation is important, what are the objects that we should investigate? Everything that exists is either a manifest phenomenon or hidden phenomenon. In the category of hidden phenomena, there are (1) phenomena that are slightly hidden and (2) phenomena that are extremely hidden (or obscured). As such, these are the three categories of phenomena to be known.

Manifest phenomena

There are obvious things such as the form that is experienced by our eye consciousness, the sound that is experienced by our ear consciousness, the taste that is experienced by our tongue consciousness and the tactile object that is experienced by our body consciousness and so forth. Form, sound, smell, taste and tactile objects are examples of manifest phenomena. You can experience them directly without analysing and having to think about them.

Slightly hidden phenomena

There are also many phenomena that cannot be directly experienced and can only be understood through reasoning. For example, if you see smoke billowing up from a certain place, although you only see the smoke, from the presence of that smoke, you can infer that there is a fire. In this case, although we cannot see the fire directly, nevertheless we can understand that a fire exists through the correct proof provided by the smoke. There are many such phenomena that can be understood through employing the correct proof or reasoning.

Extremely hidden (or obscured) phenomena

The class of extremely hidden phenomena is very difficult to understand even with the use of reasoning. An example would be the subtle workings of karma and its results. We can only understand and trust the existence of such a phenomenon by trusting and depending on the speech of a valid person.

But we are not talking here about just trusting anyone in a casual way. Before we trust that person, we would have already subjected that person to much scrutiny such as examining the teachings he has given. Upon such careful examination, when we see that whatever he has taught is true and furthermore, he has proven himself to be true with regard to many other things, then we can place our trust in the speech of that person.

Je Rinpoche, in his *Dependent Arising: A Praise of the Buddha*, said

This very path of dependent arising,
the reason for seeing your words as unparalleled,
generates conviction in the validity of other teachings.

Because of the Buddha's very precise and subtle explanation of dependent arising, therefore the Buddha is an unparalleled expounder of the teachings. By relying on Buddha's explanation of dependent arising, we can develop certainty and come to realise this truth for ourselves.

When we ascertain this truth for ourselves, we will accept the other extremely hidden phenomena that the Buddha has talked about. Lama Tsongkhapa said that this was the case for himself. Based on seeing how the Buddha was unmistakable with respect to the explanation of dependent arising, he came to believe in those other extremely hidden phenomena such as the qualities of the paths and grounds and so forth. If you recall some of the descriptions of the various qualities that the bodhisattvas achieve on the ten bodhisattva grounds, they are truly inconceivable. Then when you look at the qualities that the Buddha is said to possess, they are even more inconceivable. But one comes to trust that such attainments exist through gaining conviction in the Buddha's presentation of dependent arising.

So extremely hidden phenomena can only be understood by depending on the speech of another person. A simple example to help you understand extremely hidden phenomena would be your belief that you were born on such and such a day at such and such a time. There is no reason for you to believe that you were born on that day

and time other than being told of this by your parent.

To understand and accept an extremely hidden phenomenon, we have to depend on the speech of another person, but it is not as simple as that. First, you must have ascertained correctly that that person is indeed a valid authority. Second, you must also ascertain that that valid person will not tell you something that is not true. It is not simply a matter of believing, “It is like that because he said so.” You have to apply many reasons and there are many points that you have to think about before you can settle the issue and say, “OK, what that person said is true.”

In order to understand anything, we have to critically examine and analyse it. It is the same for the Buddha’s teachings. You have to critically analyse and think about them especially when you are studying these great treatises. One of the reasons why we study such texts is to analyse, to think about them and ascertain them for ourselves so that we can develop conviction in the subject matter. As I mentioned in the last lesson in response to a question that was posed, this is something we really have to discover and understand for ourselves.

REVIEW

We talked about:

- the basis—the two truths
- the path—method and wisdom
- the result—the two bodies of a buddha

The basis

The basis is that every phenomenon that exists has two facets or two levels of truth, the ultimate truth and the conventional truth. These two truths abide in every single existent. The two truths are one entity but different isolates.

We must understand what these two truths are. Not only that. Our understanding of one level of truth must not contradict our understanding of the other level of truth. If that were to happen, this means that you have not fully grasped the meaning of these two truths. We must know how to be able to posit these two levels of truth and have them co-exist harmoniously.

Let us use the person as an illustration. What is the person? The person is a mere appearance to the mind that it is appearing to. This mind is a mind that does not investigate nor analyse. So to this mind that neither investigates nor analyses, there is this mere appearance of a person. This is an illustration of a conventional phenomenon.

If you were to go beyond mere appearances, if you were to start analysing, “What exactly is the person? What is its ultimate nature? How does it exist?” this analysis is called distinguishing the ultimate.

At the end of that analysis, you will not find the person. You cannot find a person that you can point to, i.e., the findable person cannot be found! Instead what you will find

is the emptiness of an inherently existent person. This is the ultimate nature of the person, i.e., when you look at the person from the ultimate point of view. You do *not* find the *non-existence* of the person. This is not what you will find. What you find is the emptiness of an inherently existent person.

This is the import, the meaning behind the statement, “Not seeing is the best seeing.” This is what is found by the mind distinguishing the ultimate. At the end of that analysis, what the mind finds is *not* the non-existence of a person. What the mind finds in the end is the emptiness of an inherently existent person, that is to say the inherently existent person does *not* exist whatsoever. That is what you will find. There is nothing beyond that so this is the ultimate or the final nature of the person.

The path

As mentioned earlier, at the time of the basis, in reality, all phenomena that exist has two levels of truth, the ultimate truth and the conventional truth. These two truths are one entity but different isolates. As such, the path also has two aspects:

- The method aspect of the path deals with conventional phenomena.
- The wisdom aspect of the path refers to the mind that understands and sees the ultimate truth.

At the time of the basis, the two truths are one entity. Likewise, at the time of the path, the practices of method and wisdom must not be separated. There is a coming together of method and wisdom at the time of the path.

The two levels of truth—the ultimate truth and the conventional truth—are said to be one entity but different isolates. To better understand this, perhaps we can think about the four-fold emptinesses that were taught in the module on the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*: “Form is empty, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form. Form is also not other than emptiness.”

The result

By depending on a path that unites method and wisdom, one achieves the result of the two bodies—the truth body and the form body. One can also call these bodies the ultimate body and the conventional body respectively.

A buddha’s exalted body and a buddha’s exalted mind are one. They are inseparable, in undifferentiated union. If you have a good understanding of what a buddha really is—how a buddha’s exalted body, exalted speech and exalted mind are in one undifferentiated union—then you will understand what it means when the teachings say that whatever is perceived by a buddha’s mind, the buddha’s holy body is there. Wherever the buddha’s holy body is, the buddha’s speech is also there.

You will also come to understand how all the numberless buddhas can abide on one single atom.

When you understand in this way what a buddha really is and what are the qualities of a buddha, it makes a big difference to your mind. That is why even in this text there is a presentation of the Three Jewels.

When you have that understanding of how inconceivable the Buddha is—when you really understand that whatever is perceived by the mind of the Buddha, the Buddha’s holy exalted body is there; wherever the Buddha’s body is, the Buddha’s exalted speech is there because these three are in one undifferentiated union—then, whatever practices you do, be it going for refuge or purifying your negativities, it will make a huge difference.

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### WHY SEVEN VAJRA TOPICS?

#### 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.

It is taught that the seven vajra topics (or diamond topics) are definitely enumerated as seven. Why? This is so from the perspective of cause and effect.

What is our final object of attainment? Our final object of attainment is the final Three Jewels. When we talk about accomplishing our own purposes and accomplishing the purposes of others and bringing those two accomplishments to complete fulfilment, both are encompassed in achieving the final Three Jewels.

#### *(1) – (3) Buddha, doctrine & community (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha)*

From the perspective of the result after you have put in all the effort to achieve your objective, what do you achieve? You have “Buddha, doctrine, community,” i.e., the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

In order to achieve the result, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, you must create the cause. There are two types of causes:

1. the substantial cause
2. the cooperative condition

In a simple way, you can say, “I need the causes and conditions to produce that effect (or result).”

An illustration of this concept of substantial cause and cooperative condition is this: In order for a sprout to be produced, an indispensable cause is the seed. So in this case, the seed is the substantial cause of the sprout. But in order for the sprout to grow, you need the cooperative conditions of water, soil, fertiliser, warmth and so forth.

#### *(4) Basic constituent*

The fourth of the seven vajra topics is the basic constituent. Its cause is essentially the tathagata essence, the suchness with defilements.

This suchness with defilements is given the name, ‘cause’. From the very beginning,

this tathagata essence is pure by nature. If it is not pure by nature, then you will not be able to posit the purity of adventitious defilements.

This tathagata essence is an uncompounded phenomenon, a permanent phenomenon. As such, it cannot produce a phenomenon that undergoes momentary change. Therefore it is not a fully qualified cause, i.e., it is not a real substantial cause. Nevertheless, because the existence of this suchness with defilements is indispensable for the achievement of the final Three Jewels, it is given the name cause.

You will recall that these seven vajra topics can be approached from both the conventional and the ultimate perspectives.

From the ultimate point of view, the basic constituent would be this suchness with defilements. From the conventional point of view, it refers to the potential in the mind that is suitable to be transformed into or to become a buddha. This conventional basic constituent is what you can call an actual substantial cause.

The suchness or emptiness of our mind is an ultimate truth. The mind's factor of clarity and knowing (or awareness) is the conventional aspect of that mind. These two levels of truth have always been there and exist naturally. These are the two facets of the mind. As such, at the time of the result, these two facets of the mind can become the two bodies of a buddha.

All of us possess a mind that have such a nature. In fact, the minds of all sentient beings has those characteristics. Our minds are naturally pure and all sentient beings possess the potential that can be transformed into enlightenment. As such, one can argue that all sentient beings can become buddhas.

Therefore the cause of enlightenment does not exist outside. It exists within oneself. Every sentient being possesses that potential. For as long as one has been in existence, that potential has always been there. So there is no need to create a cause outside of one's mind because the cause is already present in one's mind.

Therefore it is said in the teachings that enlightenment is not far away. Buddhahood is not far away. If you think about what we have just discussed, then you can see how that is true because the cause of enlightenment is not outside. It is inside, within us. It has always been there. The cause of enlightenment is not far away as it is within each and every sentient being. The import of saying that enlightenment is not far away is that the cause of enlightenment is not outside but within us. So what one has to do is to work with one's mind, i.e., work with what one has.

But the teachings also say that enlightenment is not near. Enlightenment is not near because in order to achieve the enlightenment, one has to undertake hardships and bear difficulties in removing the adventitious defilements, the two obscurations. Without bearing hardships and removing the two obscurations, enlightenment cannot be achieved and thus, enlightenment is not near.

In essence, all sentient beings possess both causes of enlightenment—the substantial cause and the cooperative conditions.

*(5) – (7) Enlightenment, qualities and Buddha activities*

Enlightenment, qualities and Buddha activities are posited as the cooperative conditions that we need to achieve enlightenment.

First, Shakyamuni Buddha practised and achieved enlightenment. Then he turned the wheel of Dharma. By depending on the Buddha making available his teachings through the turning of the wheel of Dharma—the Buddha activity of giving teachings—we have to actualise what he has taught by practising the teachings. That is how we remove the adventitious defilements that are obscuring our basic constituent. Through that, we achieve enlightenment.

So these are the cooperative conditions. You need enlightenment, i.e., someone who is a buddha to teach the Dharma, then qualities and Buddha activities. The last three vajra topics are the cooperative conditions that you need to achieve enlightenment.

The seven vajra topics are definitely enumerated as seven because of what we have just discussed. In short, when we talk about the object of attainment or the object of achievement, then these are the three—the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the final Three Jewels.

In order to achieve these final Three Jewels, you need the cause. Here the basic constituent is called the cause but you also need the supporting cooperative conditions. Therefore you need to rely on the enlightenment that exists in someone else's mind, his qualities and his Buddha activities.

There are many causes of enlightenment, far more than what is enumerated here. But here we are discussing why the enumeration of the seven vajra topics is definitely seven. There are many causes of enlightenment and they can be subsumed among these seven vajra topics, i.e., you can include them somewhere within this presentation. As such, these are the seven vajra topics.

When we refer to achieving the final three objects of refuge, final here pertains to the state of full enlightenment. In order to achieve this state, one needs to familiarise oneself, meditate on, actualise and internalise the correct view.

To develop the correct view, you need to create the causes for that as well. How then do you actualise the correct view? We all possess the basic constituent, the tathagata essence, the emptiness of our mind that is by nature pure. Because by nature it is empty of existing inherently, it is possible to realise the emptiness of our mind.

We have the potential to realise this because of our mind's factor of clarity and awareness, especially the factor of awareness that allows us to correctly apply ourselves to the method. This means to develop the correct mental attention, i.e., to be able to adopt correctly what is needed to realise the correct view.



That ability of our mind to be aware of things—the factor of awareness—is inherent in all of us. We all have it naturally so it is possible to realise and actualise the correct view. Through that, we can become a buddha. It is like that because the ultimate nature of the mind is that it is empty of existing inherently and it is by nature pure.

However, although we naturally possess the cause for actualising the correct view, in order to actualise it, we need the cooperative conditions: enlightenment, qualities and Buddha activities. We need to depend on someone other than ourselves. By depending on someone else, we can actualise the correct view. This is how Gyaltshab Je explained the definite enumeration of the topics as seven.

So far, this explanation starts with presenting the Buddha, Dharma (or doctrine) and Sangha (or community) as the resultant refuge, i.e., what you yourself are going to achieve in the future, and enlightenment is posited as the causal refuge, i.e., it refers to someone other than yourself whom you can depend on.

#### *Alternative presentation*

But there is a presentation whereby these two refuges are reversed. The Buddha, Dharma (or doctrine) and Sangha (or community) are posited as the causal refuge, i.e., you are relying on someone other than yourself, and enlightenment is posited as the resultant refuge.

If we were to explain the sequence of the seven vajra topics starting with the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as the causal refuge, it would go like this:

- First, the Buddha came and turned the wheel of Dharma.
- By depending on the turning of the wheel of Dharma, individuals who actualised the Dharma Jewel became the Sangha Jewel.
- By working hard at practising the Buddha's teachings, they removed the defilements from the suchness of their minds.
- When all the defilements are completely removed from their minds, they achieved enlightenment.
- When they achieve enlightenment, they will achieve the qualities of enlightenment.
- They will also engage in the Buddha activities.

So this first verse gives a brief presentation of the subject matter of this treatise.

#### *Explanation of the term, 'vajra topic'*

Then there is an explanation of the term, 'vajra topic' or the 'vajra essential points'. Why are they called the vajra topics or the vajra essential points? It is called 'vajra' because the meaning of what these seven points are cannot be sufficiently conveyed through the use of just conventional terms or words. They are beyond the scope of ordinary thought. They are only directly accessible to the superiors. This is why they are called 'vajra'.

If we take the ultimate truth as an example, in the short homage to the perfection of wisdom, the perfection of wisdom is called the inconceivable and inexpressible perfection of wisdom. It is called inconceivable because one cannot truly understand

what emptiness is and one cannot truly understand the mind that directly perceives it with mere ordinary thought. The meaning of emptiness is that it is an object that cannot be conveyed sufficiently using words or terms. Likewise, the wisdom that directly realises emptiness also cannot be sufficiently conveyed by using ordinary words. Only the superior in meditative equipoise can fully comprehend and taste what emptiness is and know what the meditative equipoise directly focussing on emptiness means. For these reasons, these topics are called 'vajra'.

Likewise when we look at the seven vajra topics from their ultimate perspective, because of that, they are called 'vajra'.

In this context, 'topic' or 'essential point' refers to the treatise itself. It is called the topic or essential point because, first, you have to hear it, learn it and study it. Then you reflect on it. After that, you internalise and actualise it directly.

In order to show that these seven vajra topics were not created by Maitreya himself, the next verse cites the scriptural sources for these seven vajra topics.

Verse 2

These [seven] in connection are to be known by way of their own natures  
In this order in the [*Questions of King Dharanishvara Sutra*—  
The [first] three from the introduction  
[And the other] four from the divisions of the attributes of the intelligent  
[Bodhisattvas] and of Conquerors

I think we do not need to talk about that so let us treat that as done.

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Question: In the last lesson you mentioned that the ultimate Sangha Jewel refers to true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior and that the conventional Sangha Jewel refers to a Mahayana superior. My question is this: Why is the conventional Sangha Jewel a Mahayana superior and not bodhisattva superior? In the paths and grounds, we were taught that there is a difference between the bodhisattva superior and the Mahayana superior.

Khen Rinpoche: So you got your answer?

Student: I would think that they are the Mahayana superior, right?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: Can you please elaborate on the Three Final Jewels?

Answer:

- The final Buddha Jewel is the Buddha. You can say that it is the four bodies.
- The final Dharma Jewel is the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a buddha superior.

- You can posit the final Sangha Jewel as a buddha superior or you could say that it is the enjoyment body and emanation body.

Question: I refer to our discussion on one entity and two isolates. Referring to the four empties, “Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form. Form is not other than emptiness.” Can I confirm that the emptiness of form and form are the same entity but different isolates.

Khen Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: I am confused by the statement, “Emptiness is form.” Emptiness is not form because one is an ultimate truth, the other is a conventional truth; one is permanent, the other is impermanent and one is uncompounded while the other is compounded. Emptiness is not form because of the different natures of emptiness and form itself. So why is, “Emptiness is form” among the four empties?

Answer: What is posited as form? Form is just the mere appearance to the mind to which it appears. That mind does not investigate and does not go beyond this superficial appearance. There is such a mind. To that mind, that mere appearance of form is posited as form.

But if you are not satisfied with that mere appearance, if you were to investigate further, “What *is* form? Where is it? What is it?”, then that becomes an analysis of the ultimate already.

At the end of that correct analysis, what you find is the form’s emptiness, its lack of inherent existence, i.e., it does not exist inherently. That is what you find. So this is meaning of the first one statement, “Form is empty.” That is the ultimate nature of form; it is empty of existing inherently.

While it is by nature empty of existing inherently, nevertheless, it exists. It is a manifestation arising from the nature of emptiness. It exists as mere appearance. This is what is meant by, “Emptiness is form.”

This is an example of not relying on the words but relying on their meaning.

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