

**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 4**

**12 February 2015**

Meditating on Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 3—8. Buddha Jewel.

**MEDITATING ON NAGARJUNA'S PRECIOUS GARLAND**

It is useful to reflect on this verse from Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* when you are trying to understand or meditate on selflessness. He said,

A being is not earth, not water,  
Not fire, not wind, not space,  
Not consciousness, and not all of them.  
What person is there other than these?<sup>1</sup>

When we look at ourselves, the 'I' or person, we appear to be self-instituted, i.e., able to stand on our own two feet. This is how the 'I' appears. So let us check and see if the 'I' really exists in that. It is said that in reality the 'I', the person or the self, exists as that which is merely posited or merely labelled by the mind.

But in our experience, how does the 'I' appear to us? It appears as something real, standing on its own two feet, from its own side. Not only does the 'I' appear to us in that way, we also assent to that appearance and believe that is how the 'I' exists. What we have to do then is to check and see if the 'I' really exists in the way it appears to us. We could do that by reflecting on the above verse.

In reality, the 'I' exists as something that is merely labelled by the mind but that is not how it appears to us. The 'I' appears to us as existing from its own side, able

<sup>1</sup> *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom* by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, p. 59.

to stand on its own two feet and independent of other factors. Such a self-instituted 'I' is the object of negation. We have to check for ourselves whether such a self-instituted 'I', existing from its own side, really exists or not.

The person is merely designated in dependence upon the six elements. While that is the case, if we were to look for the person among the six elements, starting from the earth, the fire and so forth, we will not be able to point to any of the six elements as being the person.

Not only is the person not any of the six elements, the person is also not a composite of the six elements. At the same time, the person or 'I' is also not separate from the six elements. If you were to look for the person outside of the six elements or that is of a different nature or separate entity from the six elements, you will also not be able to find such a person.

So what is the person? Because the person is merely designated in dependence upon the composite of the six elements, as such, the person is not 'real,' i.e., the person does not exist from his own side.

Likewise, just as the person is not real in that way, since each of the six elements (or constituents) is also merely designated in dependence upon their own parts, those six elements on their own are also not real.

Just as because of being [only imputed in dependence upon] an  
aggregation of the six constituents,  
A person is not [established as his/her own] reality,  
So because of being [imputed in dependence upon] an aggregation  
Each of the constituents also is not [established as its own] reality.<sup>2</sup>

These verses talk about the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena. First, one reflects on how the person is not real. Likewise, just as the person is not real, one reflects on how the six elements or constituents themselves are also not real because they are merely designated in dependence upon their own parts.

We should understand that the conclusion is *not* that the person does not exist. It is true that if you were to look for the person among each of the six elements, you will not be able to point to any of them to be the person. You will not be able to point to the composite or the aggregation of the six elements as the person either. Then if you were to look for the person outside of the six elements, you will also not be able to point to such a real person.

If the person is not findable among the elements and outside of the elements, then one may think, "Then the person does not exist." This is incorrect. While it is true that the real 'I' cannot be found among the elements, nor outside of the elements, this does not prove that the person does not exist. Rather this proves that the *real* person does not exist. This proves that the 'I', the self or person,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59.

does not exist from her own side and does not exist as real.

As such, the first verse concludes by asking, “What person is there other than these?” because the person is a coming together of the six elements. What that means is that because the person is merely designated in dependence upon the six elements, this shows that the person exists but the real person does not exist.

The verse says, “A being is not earth, not water,/ Not fire, not wind, not space,/ Not consciousness, and not all of them.” This is what we have to check. We have to check if the person is indeed not the earth, if the person is indeed not the fire element and so forth.

The question then is whether such an analysis harms our ignorance that misconceives the ‘I’ or not? By thinking of the person in this way, will it lead us to the realisation of emptiness? If it does lead us to realise emptiness, then our analysis must harm our ignorance.

It is relatively easy to be able to discover that the ‘I’ is not any one of the five aggregates. When you look at the ‘I’, is the ‘I’ the form aggregate? Then you have the head, the arms, the body and so forth. It is quite straightforward. Obviously the ‘I’ is not the head, the ‘I’ is not the hand, the ‘I’ is not the leg and so forth. It is not difficult to understand that.

But does this mean that you know what the object of negation is? Does it bring you closer to harming your ignorance, to realising emptiness or not? It is obvious that when you think about it, you will not say, “The ‘I’ is my head.” You will not say, “The ‘I’ is my hand.” You cannot find such an ‘I’. But because you did not find the ‘I’ in your head, your arms, your legs and so forth, does it mean that you have ascertained emptiness?

But if at the end of your analysis—your ‘I’ is not your head or any of the other body parts—there is still an appearance of an inherently existent ‘I’, this shows that your analysis has not even identified the object of negation. And if you do not harm the object of negation, there is no way to realise emptiness.

Following what Nagarjuna said, if this is not the person and that is not the person, if there is such a real ‘I’, does it exist outside of the aggregates? But when you look for the ‘I’ there, you will also not be able to find the ‘I’.

At the end of your analysis, when you understand and have this feeling, “The real ‘I’ does not exist whatsoever. But an ‘I’ exists. There is this ‘I’ that is merely designated in dependence upon the aggregates or the six elements,” then you have really begun to understand what the object of negation is. You have to identify the object of negation—that is crucial—before emptiness can be realised.

Someone who has the understanding that the real ‘I’ does not exist at all although it *appears* to exist, that the ‘I’ is only that which is an imputation of the mind; that understanding comes with a real understanding of what selflessness is. This person is able to harm the object of negation. Only then can she have some closer

understanding of emptiness.

When one has that feeling that understanding that the ‘I’ is none other than that which is merely imputed by the mind in dependence on the aggregates, that it doesn’t exist in the way it appears—it is only then that one will start to see that the ignorance apprehending a self is a mistaken consciousness.

It is taught that with this understanding, one can truly see how the ignorance apprehending a self is a complete distortion of reality. One now sees that the non-inherent existence of things, i.e., that things do not exist inherently, is what really accords with reality.

With such an understanding and familiarity, one’s ignorance of apprehending a self becomes weaker and weaker over time and one will see more and more the possibility of liberation and enlightenment. One sees for oneself that liberation exists, that it is really possible to achieve liberation and enlightenment. One also sees that all one’s faults, mistakes and obscurations can actually be removed.

With this kind of knowledge and experience, one’s thirst for or interest in the Dharma will naturally occur. One will seek the Dharma because one sees that the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, is unparalleled and in a class of its own. Likewise, one sees that the founder, the Buddha, who taught the Dharma, is also in a class of his own. As mentioned in the last lesson, Lama Tsong Khapa in his *Dependent Arising: A Praise of the Buddha* had praised the Buddha as an unexcelled and unparalleled expounder because of his teachings on dependent arising.

~~~~~

### Verse 3

From Buddha, the doctrine. From the doctrine, the community of  
Superiors.

From the community, the basic constituent of essential exalted  
wisdom is attained.

Finally from exalted wisdom is attained the supreme  
enlightenment endowed with the qualities

Of the powers and so forth and effecting the welfare of sentient  
beings.

The intended audience of these teachings on the sublime continuum are Mahayanists, who are distinguished by their mind generation. What is the goal of this mind generation?

- The goal of this mind generation is to achieve full enlightenment so that one can turn the wheel of Dharma to liberate sentient beings.
- Through turning the wheel of Dharma, one produces limitless number of superiors who are the intended or special disciples.

This explains the goal or purpose of the mind generation in the continua of the intended disciples of these teachings.

These intended disciples by seeing the goal, i.e., to attain the Three Jewels,

develop the wish to purify their basic constituent of defilements. With this aspiration to purify their basic constituent (or the tathagata essence) of defilements, one can say that their tathagata essence is then manifested.

What then is the boundary of the tathagata essence? It exists all the way up to just *prior* to the achievement of enlightenment.

“The basic constituent of essential exalted wisdom is attained,/ Finally from exalted wisdom ...”: It is saying here that the basic constituent exists all the way up to *before* enlightenment. The tathagata essence does *not* exist after enlightenment is achieved so the name tathagata essence does not apply to enlightenment.

Since the tathagata essence exists prior to achieving enlightenment, it is suitable for the Buddha’s enlightened activities to engage these sentient beings.

After the complete purification of all the stains or defilements, the supreme enlightenment is achieved. As such, “Finally from exalted wisdom is attained the supreme enlightenment endowed with the qualities/ Of the powers and so forth and effecting the welfare of sentient beings.” Because one has achieved enlightenment, one is endowed with (1) the qualities of powers and so forth, and (2) the enlightened activities effecting the welfare of sentient beings.

Next is the presentation of the Three Jewels. There is a brief and an extensive presentation.

## **BUDDHA JEWEL**

First is the brief presentation of the Buddha Jewel.

### Verse 4

Obeisance to the one who has no beginning, middle, or end  
Who is quiescent, who through buddhification became buddhified  
in self-arisen aspect  
And having become buddhified, taught the path of fearlessness and  
permanence so that those who had not realized it might realize  
it,  
And who, carrying the supreme sword and diamond of knowledge  
and mercy, cuts the sprouts of suffering and destroys the walls of  
doubt that are surrounded by the darkness of various views.

As I have mentioned before, if you really want to learn, then you have to read the text a few times before coming to class, regardless of whether you understand what you are reading. You should read the text a few times and then come to class. If you are reading it for the first time right now, then there is no way that anything can happen.

I am only teaching this because you said you wanted to learn, you wanted to study, so this is how I am going to do it. If you don’t want to study, then there is

no need to do all this. There is no need to talk about all these details. I can just say, “There is the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.” Then it is finished.

But if you say that you want to learn then you must read the text on your own a few times before coming to class. Then when you come to class, pay attention and see whether my explanation makes sense or not, whether it accords with the root text or not.

Here I am explaining the meaning of the root text. When you are listening to me, you have to look at your root text. If you just sit there, listening and being content with what you hear, you are not going to understand much.

The fourth verse starts with, “Obeisance,” i.e., paying homage to the Buddha.

What kind of qualities does the Buddha, the object of our homage, possess? In the explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Jewel, some are uncompounded and some are compounded

#### *Uncompounded qualities*

First, there is an explanation of the uncompounded qualities of the Buddha. “The one who has no beginning, middle, or end,” is a description of the nature body, which is uncompounded. As such, it is not produced, it does not abide and it does not disintegrate. Therefore it “has no beginning, middle or end.”

The nature body is being discussed from the perspective of its factor of natural purity, i.e., by nature, it is free from existing inherently. Applying this to these three words, “beginning, middle or end,” it is said then that the nature body has:

- no inherently existent beginning
- no inherently existent middle
- no inherently existent end

“Who is quiescent” or pacified is referring to the nature body from the perspective of its factor of adventitious purity.

#### *Composed qualities*

~ *Wisdom directly seeing the two truths*

“Who through buddhification became buddhified in self-arisen aspect,” refers to the Buddha’s composed quality, i.e., the wisdom that directly perceives things as they are. “Buddhification became buddhified in self-arisen aspect”: This is referring to the wisdom that directly perceives the two truths.

~ *Quality of mercy*

“So that those who had not realized it might realize it” shows the quality of mercy. Out of mercy for “those who had not realized it,” the Buddha taught the path of fearlessness and permanence so that they “might realise it.”

~ *Quality of power*

“And who, carrying the supreme sword and diamond of knowledge and mercy,

cuts the sprouts of suffering and destroys the walls of doubt that are surrounded by the darkness of various views”: The remainder of this verse shows the quality of power.

In short, this verse shows:

1. The factor of natural purity of the nature body
2. The factor of adventitious purity of the nature body
3. The quality of mercy
4. The quality of power

This is the brief presentation of the qualities of the Buddha Jewel.

Next is the slightly more extensive explanation of those points that I have just mentioned.

#### Verse 5

Buddhahood has [the eight qualities of] being uncompounded,  
Spontaneous, not being realized through the cause of others,  
Knowledge, mercy, and power,  
As well as being [the fulfilment of] the two aims [of oneself and others].

One can talk about the Buddha from the perspective of the body of the Buddha that is for:

- fulfilling the purpose of oneself
- fulfilling the purpose of others

“Buddhahood has [the eight qualities of] being uncompounded”: This is similar to what was mentioned earlier in reference to the nature body. Here it is referring to the nature body that:

- has the factor of natural purity
- is an ultimate truth
- is an uncompounded phenomenon

“Spontaneous,” here refers to the factor of adventitious purity of the nature body, i.e., the nature body that is purified of the adventitious defilements. This is referring to the true cessations in the continuum of the Buddha.

“Not being realized through the cause of others” refers to the wisdom that directly realizes the ultimate truth, i.e., that directly perceives the ultimate nature of things, seeing them exactly as they are. Such a wisdom is not produced by depending on something else.

“Knowledge” refers to the quality of that wisdom that directly perceives conventionalities.

“Mercy” refers to the quality of mercy.

“Power” refers to the quality of power.

The quality of spontaneity mentioned above refers to how the Buddha’s activities

of benefitting others are spontaneous and effortless. They require neither motivation nor effort. This is only possible when one has removed the obstacles to such spontaneity.

There are different degrees of obstacles, coarse and subtle. The subtle obstacle that prevents spontaneity is the knowledge obscurations but because the Buddha is free of knowledge obscurations, therefore his activities to benefit sentient beings are spontaneous and effortless.

The next three verses expand on what we have just discussed.

#### Verse 6

Because of having a nature without beginning [i.e., without production],  
Middle [abiding], or end [cessation], it is uncompounded.  
Because of possessing the quiescent Truth Body,  
It is said to be spontaneous.

#### Verse 7

Because of being realized by oneself individually,  
It is not realized through the cause of others.  
Because of realizing [those] aspects in that way, it is knowledge.  
Because of teaching the path, merciful.

#### Verse 8

It is power because of removing suffering  
And afflictive emotions through exalted wisdom and compassion.  
Through the first three, one's own welfare [is accomplished];  
Through the latter three, others' aims.

### SUMMARY

How many qualities does the Buddha possess in this context? It is said there are eight qualities.

1. Buddhahood has the quality of being uncompounded. This shows the Buddha's quality of natural purity.
2. The quality of spontaneity refers to the quality that occurs due to the complete pacification of all effort and motivation. The nature body has two divisions. This quality of spontaneity refers to the quality of the nature body that is the factor of adventitious purity, i.e., the factor of being purified of the adventitious defilements. Here it is referring to the true cessations in the Buddha's continuum.
3. "Not being realized through the cause of others," indicates the Buddha's wisdom that directly perceives phenomena as they are, i.e., the wisdom that directly perceive emptiness.
4. "Knowledge" refers to the Buddha's wisdom that directly perceives conventionalities.
5. "Mercy" refers to the great compassion in the continuum of the Buddha.
6. "Power" refers to the quality of power.
7. The quality of fulfilling one's own purpose.
8. The quality of fulfilling the purpose of others.



This is an introduction of the Buddha Jewel who we entrust ourselves to, generate faith and take refuge in. The Buddha Jewel is said to possess these eight qualities.

The next three verses is the clarification of these eight qualities. We can look at them in the next class. Please read your root text. For now, you have to know what these eight qualities of the Buddha are. You have to know that there are eight qualities and you have to know what they are.

~~~~~

(A student requests for clarification of the meaning of the supreme emanation body and the ordinary emanation body).

*Answer:* Indeed there are many things to know and words and terminologies to learn.

Let's deal with the supreme emanation body. An example of the supreme emanation body is Shakyamuni Buddha. In reality, Shakyamuni Buddha was enlightened a long time ago. He displayed twelve deeds such as the deeds of being born, achieving enlightenment and then passing into parinirvana and so forth. The emanation body that displayed these twelve deeds is called the supreme emanation body and is only accessible to people who have pure karma.

On the other hand, the emanation body in general need not be one that displays the twelve deeds. In fact, a buddha can manifest as all kinds of emanations. A buddha can manifest as a dog, as a human being, as one's parents, as the virtuous friend and so forth. These emanations of a buddha are called emanation bodies. They are emanated for the sake of helping all kinds of beings. As such, you do not need pure karma to see or to come in contact with these emanation bodies.

Seeing the complete enjoyment body that is adorned with the major signs and minor exemplifications is even more difficult as that is only accessible to the bodhisattva superiors.

With regard to a buddha, for example, his nature body which are the factor of natural purity and the factor of adventitious purity or his wisdom directly perceiving all phenomena, i.e., both their ultimate truth and their conventional truth—these truth bodies of a buddha can only be directly realized by other buddhas themselves. Even the bodhisattva superiors cannot realize these directly.

*Question:* Among the eight qualities, there are compounded and un-compounded qualities. Can you please elaborate on the compounded qualities?

*Answer:* The qualities of being un-compounded and spontaneous refer to the factor of natural purity and the factor of adventitious purity related to the nature body. These two are un-compounded qualities.

The qualities of the wisdom that directly sees the two truths and the qualities of knowledge, mercy and power are the compounded qualities.

*Question:* “Who through buddhification became buddhified in self-arisen aspect” (Verse 4), what is the meaning of “self-arisen aspect”?

*Answer:* “Who through buddhification became buddhified in self-arisen aspect” refers to the self-arisen wisdom, omniscience. Achieving omniscience, i.e., moving from the last moment of being a sentient being to becoming a buddha, that achievement of enlightenment is not dependent on a guru. One achieves it by oneself. It happens within one’s meditative equipoise. So from being a sentient being, you become a buddha in that single meditative equipoise. One has to achieve this for oneself by oneself.

*Question:* I would like to clarify two of the four reliances:

- Do not rely on the words but rather rely on their meaning.
- Do not rely on the interpretative meaning but rather rely on the definitive meaning.

What is the difference between the two as they seem to have a similar message?

*Answer:* “Do not rely on the words” means not to qualify something as good or bad merely based on whether the words themselves sound pleasant or not.

The Buddha had made statements such as, “Phenomena are truly existent.” You cannot take those statements literally because, in reality, things are not truly existent. Therefore the meaning of that statement made by the Buddha is interpretative in that you need to find out the intent behind that statement. There is something more than the literal meaning of those words. As such, it is not definitive.

Why can’t we take such statements made by the Buddha such as “Things are truly existent,” literally? Because it goes against reality as in reality, things are not truly existent. As such, we cannot take that statement literally. Of course, there were reasons behind why the Buddha said that. There must be a deeper purpose behind that statement and the Buddha must be trying to convey something else. Therefore, as such, you cannot take it literally. The meaning of that statement is only interpretive.

*Question:* What does pure karma mean?

*Answer:* Pure karma means that you are free of the karma that prevents you from seeing the supreme emanation body!

You have to read the root text on your own whether you understand it or not. Then when you hear the commentary, you try to relate the explanation given to the root text. This is how the text can become clearer over time. You must read the text.

But you cannot expect to understand this text by reading alone as it is a difficult

text to understand. You won't be able to understand it by just looking at the words. You cannot expect to understand what "uncompounded" means, what "spontaneous" means. That is not possible. There are so many other things you have to put in place.

If something is "uncompounded," there must be something that is "compounded." The opposite of being uncompounded is being compounded. "Compounded" or composed means something that is produced, abides and then disintegrates. What is production? What is abiding? What is disintegratedness? You have to gather so much information and then slowly put them together. So understanding is not going to happen immediately.

The point here is that the Buddha who you take refuge in has the quality of mercy, knowledge, true cessations and so forth. This is the Buddha who we entrust ourselves to.

This section here is explaining who we are taking refuge in. If you relate this to the lam-rim, in the section on refuge when it talks about the qualities of the Three Jewels, it is explained why the Buddha is a suitable object of refuge. Four reasons were given:

1. He has freed himself from all faults, obscurations and mistakes. This indicates the quality of true cessations.
2. The Buddha is skilled in the method of freeing others from their fears and suffering. This refers to the quality of knowledge. He knows exactly what to do.
3. The Buddha possesses the great compassion that is free from bias. That is referring to the Buddha's quality of mercy.

So what is the fourth reason?

<b>THE EIGHT QUALITIES OF THE BUDDHA JEWEL</b>			
1	Quality of being uncompounded	Factor of natural purity (the nature body that is pure from the beginning is uncompounded i.e. it is not produced, does not abide, and does not disintegrate).	7. Fulfilling the purpose of oneself
2	Quality of being spontaneous	Factor of adventitious purity (the nature body that is free from adventitious defilements). Spontaneous refers to the true cessations in the continuum of the Buddha.	
3	Quality of not being realized through the cause of others	The wisdom that directly perceives emptiness.	
4	Quality of knowledge	The wisdom that directly perceives conventionalities.	8. Fulfilling the purpose of others
5	Quality of mercy	The great compassion in the continuum of the Buddha.	
6	Quality of power	Depending on the power of knowledge and power of mercy, it can completely remove and destroy suffering and its causes.	

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng & Rachel Tan; edited by Cecilia Tsong.