

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 5

24 February 2015

Achieving liberation. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Reviewing Verse 5. Buddha Jewel. Verses 9—12. Dharma Jewel.

ACHIEVING LIBERATION

What is liberation?

Nagarjuna said in his *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way* that liberation is the final cessation or exhaustion of karma and afflictions.

A whole host of discursive thoughts arise from our karma and afflictions. What follows is suffering. What is the root of these discursive thoughts? Their root is said to be the elaboration of true existence.

The elaboration of true existence ceases or is exhausted by the realization of emptiness. Liberation then is the final cessation and exhaustion of all karma and afflictions. But liberation cannot arise without a cause. The cause is the force of the antidote exhausting the afflictions. Liberation is then achieved.

We circle in cyclic existence under the power of our karma and afflictions. Of the two, the main cause of cyclic existence is the afflictions. It is said that through the force of applying a strong antidote, one is able to reduce the strength or power of the afflictions to the point that one will no longer *freshly* accumulate propelling karma. Then even though one has accumulated such karma in the past, as the strength of the afflictions that nourish the karmic seeds are now much weaker, those karmic seeds can no longer bear fruit. They can no longer come to fruition. These karmic seeds can be likened to rotten or burnt seeds.

What is liberation? Liberation has to be understood at the level of the consciousness. It refers essentially to the suchness of one's mind for liberation is the cessation or exhaustion of karma and afflictions.

How is liberation achieved?

On the basis of our contaminated appropriated physical and mental aggregates, we experience the different kinds of suffering such as aging, sickness and death. The cause of our appropriated contaminated physical and mental aggregates is our karma and afflictions. Specifically our set of appropriated contaminated physical and mental aggregates is the result of the karma that arises due to our afflictions.

How did the afflictions that are responsible for the accumulation of the karma arise? The afflictions arise mainly from incorrect mental attention, i.e., the elaboration of true existence. The elaboration of true existence is the root from which the afflictions arise.

~ Apprehension of inherent existence

We have discussed this before. How does a person or any other phenomenon that appears to us, how does it appear? It appears to us to be existing right there from its own side.

Not only does everything appear to us to exist from its own side. We assent to that appearance. We believe that this is how everything exists. We are not able to realize that they are mere appearances.

The evolution is like this:

- The object in question appears to us to exist from its own side.
- We assent to that appearance, believing that, in reality, this is how it really exists.
- With that as the basis, incorrect mental attention sets in by exaggerating the reality of the object.

Because we have already assented to the appearance of true existence, we believe that that is how the object exists, that that is the truth. Because we hold so firmly to this 'truth', incorrect mental attention sets in by exaggerating the qualities of the object.

Let's take the example of an attractive object. Incorrect mental attention exaggerates its beauty beyond what is actually there. Likewise for an ugly object, incorrect mental attention also exaggerates the ugliness of that object beyond what is actually there. The apprehension of true existence is the basis upon which incorrect mental attention arises, exaggerating the good or bad qualities of the object in question. All kinds of exaggeration and superimposition set in that lead to the arising of very strong attachment and desire or anger and aversion. Due to the arising of these afflictions, karma is accumulated. Then one has to experience the results of that karma, suffering.

~ Refuting inherent existence and realising emptiness

It is said by Nagarjuna that the elaboration of true existence ceases or is stopped by

emptiness. Since that apprehension of true existence is the root of all our problems and suffering, what stops this apprehension? It is none other than emptiness.

The apprehension of true existence is the grasping at phenomena as existing from its own side. We have heard that phenomena do *not* exist from their own side but this is something that we have to establish for ourselves.

For example, we can take the person as our object of enquiry. Remember the verse from the *Precious Garland*,

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?¹

On the basis of this verse, one can analyse and check whether the person does exist from her own side or not.

In the above verse, Nagarjuna said that the person is not real because it is merely designated in dependence upon the collection of the six elements. And even the six elements individually are not real because they are merely designated in dependence upon their own parts. It is also mentioned that space itself is not real and does not exist from its own side. Why is that so? Because space is none other than the mere absence of obstructiveness, a mere absence of an element such as form. Even form itself does not exist from its own side either. And so names, terms and labels themselves do not exist from their own side.²

There are many reasons that refute the very concept of existence from its own side but this is something that we need to prove to ourselves. We need to think about it.

First, we need to understand that there is no such thing as inherent existence. We need to ascertain and be convinced about that. This definite understanding, ascertainment and conviction are able to directly counteract our apprehension of true existence. Why? Because with such understanding and ascertainment, our mode of apprehending any object will be in direct contradiction to how ignorance apprehends the object. Therefore the ascertainment of the emptiness of inherent existence is able to directly harm the mode of apprehension of ignorance.

By cultivating and increasing the strength of this ascertainment of the emptiness of inherent existence, the stronger this ascertainment, the weaker will be the apprehension of a self. This is how one progresses along the paths and grounds.

- When one reaches the path of preparation, one realises emptiness via a generic

¹ *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom* by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, 2008. p. 59.

² Because the phenomena of forms

Are only names, space too is only a name.

Without the elements, how could forms exist?

Therefore even name-only does not exist (Verse 99, Chapter 1, *Precious Garland* by Nagarjuna, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Snow Lion Publications, 2007).

image.

- When one reaches the path of seeing, one sees emptiness directly. At this point in time, because of one's direct realization of emptiness, one's apprehension of a self is weakened to the point whereby it can no longer give rise to the afflictions that will lead one to accumulate fresh projecting karma.
- On the path of meditation, by familiarising oneself over and over again with the mind that directly perceives emptiness, there will come a time when one can completely eliminate karma and the afflictions.
- When one does that, one achieves liberation. This is the path of no-more-learning.

Basically this is how one progresses on the path.

It is very important that you gain an understanding of all these points. You need to think and come to understand for yourself:

- how you suffer in samsara
- how you circle in samsara over and over again due to your own karma and afflictions
- how your ignorance, the apprehension of a self, is the root of all your problems

In particular, you have to see and prove to yourself why the realisation of emptiness can liberate you from grasping at a self and how your own understanding of emptiness can harm your ignorance.

When you are able to resolve these issues for yourself—when you can really see and feel it—then you can truly understand the possibility of liberation.

You will also come to understand that no one, except the Buddha, has taught this entire path. In particular, he talked about dependent arising. Then you will be able to develop a faith in the Buddha's teachings that is acquired through reasoning.

If you were to reflect well on all the various points that I have just brought up, then you will gain a good understanding of what the Three Jewels are. Here, when we talk about the Three Jewels, we are talking about the resultant Three Jewels, what we can achieve for ourselves. We will understand that these Three Jewels *are* achievable, that it can happen to us in our mind. This is important.

Having seen for yourself that the apprehension of true existence is the real harm-doer and that it can be destroyed, you can then see the possibility of achieving freedom from all suffering for yourself.

Liberation lies within us

But what makes all this possible? All this is made possible because it is said that we possess the potential to achieve such an understanding, that such liberation is right there within our own being.

You have heard that our mind is said to be in the nature of clear light. Whether you call it the clear light nature of the mind, the tathagata essence or basic constituent, this is what gives us any chance or hope for liberation.

It is said that mental qualities, such as the mind that realises selflessness and develops compassion, are able to increase without limit, unlike physical qualities that are limited by constraints. There is only so much that we can do in relation to our physical qualities. You cannot increase them indefinitely. But mental qualities can be developed without limits. Furthermore it is said that mental qualities, once developed, can increase further without much additional effort. That is the difference between physical and mental qualities.

Once certain mental qualities are developed in the mind, all it needs is a small condition acting as a catalyst for that mental quality to arise in the mind again without us putting in a lot of effort.

The qualities that are achieved on the paths and grounds are qualities that still require some effort for them to arise. The motivation to act is still required all the way up to even the tenth ground.

But once enlightenment is achieved, no more motivation is required. All the activities of a buddha are said to be spontaneous in that they arise primarily due to the power of the prayers that were made while the practitioner was on the path. After achieving enlightenment, the power of the prayers and aspiration are complete. As such, all the spontaneous and effortless activities of a buddha arise due to the power of these completed prayers.

A Buddha's enlightened activities will engage sentient beings uninterruptedly forever until the end of the time, until the end of samsara, when there are no more sentient beings left. It is said that the spontaneity of a buddha's enlightened activities is likened to a reflection in the mirror. That reflection appears on the mirror without any effort. While one is still on the path, i.e., when one has yet to become a buddha, one still needs effort and the motivation to do something. But a buddha does not need to be motivated as his activities are effortless. A buddha is someone who has fulfilled both his own aims and the aims of others.

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## REVIEW

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].

Verse 5 talks about the eight qualities of the Buddha Jewel. Buddhahood is said to have the quality of "being uncompounded." This refers to the factor of natural purity of the nature body. The quality of being "spontaneous" refers to the factor of adventitious purity of the nature body. What prevent spontaneity are the obscurations. When one is free of the obscurations, then one is "spontaneous." Even the bodhisattvas from the first to the tenth grounds are unable to work spontaneously and effortlessly for sentient beings because it is said that they

possess the factor of the twelve links that are included in the knowledge obscurations.

Generally speaking, the presentation of the twelve links of dependent origination is made from the perspective of the afflictions. But there is also an explanation of the twelve links from the perspective of the knowledge obscurations.

There is a category of karma called uncontaminated (or pure) karma. The subtle knowledge obscurations bring about the accumulation of pure karma. Through that, on the basis of having acquired a mental body, the bodhisattva superior undergoes the inconceivable transference of death. This is a way of explaining the twelve links in relation to beings who accumulate pure karma.

In order to do spontaneous and effortless work for sentient beings, one must abandon the twelve links that are included in the knowledge obstructions. Only a buddha can do that because in order to do that, one has to achieve the nature body that is the factor of adventitious purity.

The Buddha Jewel also possesses the quality of “not being realized through the cause of others.” At the very last moment of one’s existence as a sentient being, how does one become a buddha in the next moment? This is achieved during meditative equipoise. During the end of the continuum of a sentient being and within the meditative equipoise directly focussing on emptiness, one moves to the path of no-more-learning and one becomes a buddha. One does that by oneself without having to rely on anyone else.

The first three qualities—the qualities of being un compounded, spontaneous and not being realized through the cause of others—are presented mainly from the perspective of achieving one’s own purpose or aims.

The next three qualities—the qualities of knowledge, mercy and power—are qualities that are related to the fulfilment of the aims of others.

The quality of knowledge refers to the Buddha’s quality of knowing all conventionalities.

The quality of mercy and the quality of power are qualities that arise from the Buddha’s knowledge of conventionalities. Since the Buddha knows all conventionalities, he knows that the tathagata essence exists in the continuum of every sentient being. Knowing that, the Buddha generates mercy.

The Buddha perceives the two truths directly. He perceives the ultimate nature of all phenomena and he also perceives all conventionalities. But his knowledge of the ultimate nature of all phenomena is said to be related to the fulfilment of his own aims while his knowledge of conventionalities is discussed in relation to the fulfilment of the aims of others.

What would you say if somebody were to ask you, “Why is it that the Buddha’s understanding of the ultimate nature of all phenomena is classified under the

fulfilment of his own aims and not the aims of others?”

### **DHARMA JEWEL**

Verse 9 talks about the Dharma Jewel, i.e., true cessations and true paths.

#### Verse 9

Obeisance to the sun of excellent doctrine, not non-existent,  
Not existent, not existent and non-existent, and not analyzable as  
other than existent and non-existent, devoid of description,  
Known by oneself individually, quiescent, undefiled, illumined with  
the light rays of exalted wisdom,  
And thoroughly destroying desire, hatred, and obscuration with  
respect to all objects of observation.

“Obeisance to the sun of excellent doctrine, not non-existent,/ ... Known by oneself individually, quiescent ...”: This is a description of true cessations.

“... undefiled, illumined with the light rays of exalted wisdom,/ And thoroughly destroying desire, hatred, and obscuration with respect to all objects of observation.”: This is related to true paths.

The verse starts with a description talking about the four extremes. Here we are talking about the true cessations that are natural purity that is “not non-existent, not existent, not existent and non-existent, and not analyzable as other than existent and non-existent.” Here we are talking about the nature or entity of true cessations that are natural purity.

The true cessations that are natural purity are free from the four extremes of permanence and annihilation. If you analyse the four extremes or possibilities between permanence and annihilation, you will find that they do not exist inherently.

- There isn't such a thing as inherently existent non-dependence. This constitutes the extreme of permanence.
- Asserting that things do not function conventionally is to assert the extreme of annihilation, i.e., such things do not exist for things do function conventionally.
- These two are not inherently existent.
- Things that are not these two also do not exist inherently.

So these are the four extremes. For the true cessations that are natural purity, no matter how you analyse the four extremes, you will not be able to point to something that is inherently existent.

True cessations that are natural purity cannot be described with mere words so it is “devoid of description.”

“Known by oneself individually” means that it can only be experienced or known by a mind to which all dualistic appearances have subsided.

When you talk about this from the perspective of the mind that realizes it, then it is said to be something that is “devoid of description, known by oneself individually”. Such true cessations that are natural purity can only be known by a mind for which all dualistic appearances have subsided.

We had discussed earlier how karma and afflictions are the roots of cyclic existence. Karma arises from our afflictions and the afflictions arise from incorrect mental attention. Here, all these causes of cyclic existence have been pacified. So “quiescent” is referring to that factor of purity of adventitious stains of true cessations that comes from the pacification or destruction of the apprehension of true existence, incorrect mental attention, the afflictions and so forth which are the causes of cyclic existence.

*True paths*

“Undefined”—here we are talking about true paths—refers to the stainless wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. Earlier on we had discussed how incorrect mental attention gives rise to all the different afflictions by superimposing qualities on the object of observation thus giving rise to desire, hatred and so forth. The wisdom directly perceiving emptiness is free or purified of any of these obscurations and is therefore “undefined” or stainless. “Undefined” pertains to that wisdom’s quality of purity.

This wisdom directly perceiving emptiness is also said to possess “the light rays of exalted wisdom” that has completely destroyed “desire, hatred, and obscuration with respect to all objects of observation.” Being “illuminated with the light rays of exalted wisdom” is a reference to its quality of clarity that can act as an antidote against afflictions such as desire and hatred, and the obscurations that arise from incorrect mental attention.

|                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| “Not non-existent, Not existent, not existent and non-existent, and not analyzable as other than existent and non-existent”                               | True cessations that are natural purity free from these four extremes of permanence and annihilation.                                                                                                                                       | True cessations |
| “Devoid of description”                                                                                                                                   | True cessations that are natural purity that cannot be described with mere words.                                                                                                                                                           |                 |
| “Known by oneself individually”                                                                                                                           | True cessations that are natural purity can only be experienced by a mind to which all dualistic appearances have subsided.                                                                                                                 |                 |
| “Quiescent”                                                                                                                                               | Factor of purity of adventitious stains of true cessations, i.e., being purified of the adventitious stains that are the causes of cyclic existence— apprehension of true existence, incorrect mental attentions, afflictions and so forth. |                 |
| “Undefined”                                                                                                                                               | The quality of purity of the stainless wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.                                                                                                                                                                | True paths      |
| “Illuminated with the light rays of exalted wisdom, and thoroughly destroying desire, hatred, and obscuration with respect to all objects of observation” | The quality of clarity of the stainless wisdom directly perceiving emptiness that can act as an antidote against afflictions, such as desire and hatred, and the obscurations that arise from incorrect mental attention.                   |                 |



*Eight qualities of the Dharma Jewel*

Verse 10

Due to being unthinkable, without the two [i.e., contaminated actions and afflictive emotions],  
Without conceptions, pure, clear, and antidotal,  
The doctrine is that which is and that by which there is the [state]  
Devoid of passions—having the character of the [last] two truths.

1. Earlier we had referred to how true cessations that are natural purity are devoid of the four extremes. This is beyond the grasp of our mind and is therefore “unthinkable.”
2. “Without the two” means without any karma and afflictions.
3. “Without conceptions” means without the conceptions of true existence.
- 4—6. The qualities of being “pure, clear and antidotal” refer to the qualities of true paths.

Up to “antidotal” we have six qualities. Although reference has already been made to true cessations and true paths, if we were to enumerate true cessations and true paths separately, then we have eight qualities. The first three qualities are subsumed under true cessations. The next three qualities are subsumed under true paths.

| EIGHT QUALITIES OF THE DHARMA JEWEL |                       |                                                                               |                         |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1                                   | “Unthinkable”         | The true cessations that are natural purity are beyond the grasp of the mind. | 7<br>true<br>cessations |
| 2                                   | “Without the two”     | Without any karma and afflictions.                                            |                         |
| 3                                   | “Without conceptions” | Without the conceptions of true existence.                                    |                         |
| 4                                   | pure                  |                                                                               | 8<br>true<br>paths      |
| 5                                   | clear                 |                                                                               |                         |
| 6                                   | antidotal             |                                                                               |                         |

The four noble truths can be included or subsumed within the two truths:-

- the truth of the thoroughly afflicted class
- the truth of the completely purified class.

Verse 11

This devoid [and making devoid] of passions is included  
Within true cessations and paths.  
Respectively those are also to be known  
By way of three qualities each.

Verse 12

It is unthinkable because of being unanalyzable, inexpressible, and known by Superiors.  
Due to being quiescent it is without the two,  
And it is without [improper] conceptions.  
The three, purity and so forth [i.e., clear and antidotal] are like the sun.

Now we have finished with the Dharma Jewel. If you have any questions about the Dharma Jewel, we have a few minutes.

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Student: Regarding your question—“Why is the Buddha’s understanding of the ultimate truth classified under the fulfilment of his own aims and not the aims of others?”—my answer is this: Can that be referring to the wisdom realizing emptiness during the Buddha’s last moment as a sentient being? Therefore his knowledge of the ultimate truth helps only him to overcome the knowledge obscurations. Therefore it doesn’t help other sentient beings.

Khen Rinpoche: The qualities pertaining to the knowledge of the ultimate nature of things are classified under the fulfilment of one’s own aims whereas the quality of knowledge itself is classified under the fulfilment of the aims of others. The question is why can’t it be the other way round? Another way of putting it is this: Why can’t, for example, the quality of knowledge be included under the fulfilment of the aims of oneself?

Student: Because “knowledge” here only refers to his knowledge of conventional truth. It does not include his understanding of ultimate truth.

Khen Rinpoche: Another way of putting it is this: Why can’t the Buddha’s knowledge of how things actually exist, their final nature, be classified under the fulfilment of the aims of others. What is wrong with classifying that understanding of the ultimate nature of phenomena under the fulfilment of the aims of others?

Student: Because my understanding is that his knowledge of the ultimate truth results in the nature body, the dharmakaya. This doesn’t benefit sentient beings directly. Also, I had read that this knowledge, his wisdom realizing emptiness, is to purify his own defilements. In that sense, that knowledge is for his own benefit, to help him become a buddha. Therefore it doesn’t benefit sentient beings.

Khen Rinpoche: I don’t know.

Student: Another question. You have asked us to think about the twelve links of dependent arising in the past module. Tonight we heard that the twelve links of dependent arising could be used to explain how the bodhisattva suffers from his ...

Khen Rinpoche: Who say “suffer”?

Student: That was a different set of twelve links? This present set of twelve links has nothing to do with samsara?

Khen Rinpoche: I didn’t say the bodhisattvas “suffer.”

Student: You had asked us then (in a previous module), “Does the bodhisattva superior still have any of the twelve links?” Just now you said the twelve links could be used to explain how a bodhisattva up to the tenth ground still have the

knowledge obscurations. Due to that, he has uncontaminated karma, resulting in the inconceivable transference of death. I am clarifying that the twelve links you talk about now has nothing to do with the twelve links we use to explain samsara. Am I correct?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: My understanding is that for a superior being, they no longer have the ignorance of the first link. It seems like today you are saying that such a being still has the twelve links. Can you please clarify?

Khen Rinpoche: You are not listening. Maybe you are not listening well!

The twelve links is usually discussed in the context of how someone circles in cyclic existence under the power of karma and afflictions. Motivated by ignorance, one accumulates karma and so forth. So one circles in cyclic existence primarily due to the power of the afflictions.

The discussion today of the twelve links in relation to the bodhisattva superiors does not pertain to that. The discussion of the twelve links that is included within the knowledge obscurations does *not* pertain to how sentient beings circle in cyclic existence under the power of karma and afflictions.

Here we are talking about the links in relation to the bodhisattva superiors. That's where you hear the term, 'the levels of the predispositions of ignorance'.

Motivated by the subtle knowledge obscurations, the bodhisattva superiors accumulate pure karma. They then take on a mental body. With that mental body, they undergo the inconceivable transference of death. Bodhisattva superiors do not have true sufferings unlike ordinary sentient beings who circle in cyclic existence under the power of karma and afflictions.

The bodhisattva superiors, although they possess a mental body, do not have true sufferings. This mental body undergoes birth and death. Although the bodhisattva superiors undergo birth and death, that experience of birth and death is not the result of karma and afflictions. Their mental body came about due to their pure karma.

With this mental body, they experience the inconceivable transference of death. When a bodhisattva superior becomes a buddha, he no longer has a mental body. He no longer undergoes the inconceivable transference of death for he has pacified the twelve links that is included within the subtle knowledge obscurations. As such, he is "quiescent" or pacified.

Prior to becoming a buddha, although the bodhisattva superiors do work for sentient beings, their work for sentient beings requires effort and motivation. When a bodhisattva superior becomes a buddha, his activities or work for sentient beings become spontaneous and effortless.

My question now is this: Does a buddha accumulate karma?
(Responses from students are inaudible).

Khen Rinpoche: No? The Buddha doesn't create good karma? The Buddha gives charity to sentient beings. The Buddha doesn't create good karma by doing that?

I'm now asking you. The Buddha gives charity to other sentient beings. Does the Buddha create good karma or not?

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