

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.

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Lesson 6

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Question & Answer. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 13—17. Sangha Jewel.

Question: Is the term, Mahayana superior, applied only to a buddha or does it include the arya bodhisattva?

Answer: The term, Mahayana superior, has a greater pervasion than the term, bodhisattva superior.

There are five Mahayana paths—the path of accumulation, path of preparation, path of seeing, path of meditation and path of no-more-learning. These are called the Mahayana paths. They are not referred to as the five bodhisattva paths.

The Mahayana path of no-more-learning is a Mahayana path and is achieved when the two obscurations are removed and one becomes a buddha. Hence the term, Mahayana superior, includes a buddha. As such, the term, Mahayana superior, has a greater pervasion whereas the term, bodhisattva superior, has a smaller pervasion.

A Mahayana superior is not necessarily a bodhisattva superior whereas a bodhisattva superior is necessarily a Mahayana superior.

Question: There is a statement in tenets that says, "True cessations is necessarily an ultimate truth." We usually refer to the ultimate truth as the emptiness of inherent existence. Now we learn that true cessations have two purities.

Does that mean that an ultimate truth is not only referring to the emptiness of inherent existence but there is also an instance of an ultimate truth that refers to an abandonment of obscurations?

If that is the case—if an ultimate truth is emptiness of inherent existence and is also an abandonment of obscurations—doesn't that mean that the object of negation for an ultimate truth could be an existent?

We have always learnt that the object of negation of emptiness has always been the inherent existence of a person or phenomenon. That inherent existence has never existed and will never exist.

On the other hand, in the case of the abandonment of obscurations—an absence of the obscurations themselves—the object of negation will be the obscurations that exist in a person's continuum. Wouldn't that mean there would be a third object of negation for emptiness?

Khen Rinpoche: I am not quite getting your question.

In essence, you are asking whether there are more than one object of negation?

Answer: The Prasangikas assert that true cessations are emptiness and an ultimate truth. The Sautrantikas does not assert that true cessations are an ultimate truth.

Remember the statement from Nagarjuna that liberation is the cessation of karma and afflictions? So at the end of the day, if you want to point to something that is liberation, what exactly is it? Liberation is not to be found outside of the mind. When karma and the afflictions are removed, what is left is the reality of the mind. The emptiness of that mind is posited as liberation.

The apprehension of true existence is not part of the nature of the mind for when the wisdom realizing selflessness is generated, that apprehension of true existence is destroyed. The wisdom realizing selflessness is an antidote against the apprehension of true existence. When the strength of the wisdom realizing selflessness increases, that obscuration is destroyed, in the same manner that darkness disappears when there is light. When that obscuration is removed, the reality of the mind is revealed. What you have left is just that. That is why we say that the nature of the mind is clear light.

The mind has never existed inherently. From the time the mind existed, it has always been empty of existing inherently. So when we talk about 'natural purity', we are talking about the mind's emptiness of true existence.

Although our mind has always been like that—i.e., empty of existing inherently—however, it is covered with the adventitious defilements. As such, we cannot say that there are true cessations right from the beginning. The mind's emptiness of true existence, the ultimate nature of the mind, has always been like that. That is the natural purity. But it is covered with the adventitious

defilements.

So when one generates the wisdom realizing selflessness, when that wisdom becomes powerful enough to act as an antidote to the apprehension of true existence, when any part of this apprehension of true existence has ceased, its cessation is achieved. This is an example of adventitious purity. Although the end result is the emptiness of the mind, this unravelling of the nature of the mind, this achievement of adventitious purity, is the result of cultivating its antidote.

Both purities—the natural purity and the adventitious purity—are emptinesses but you cannot say that they are equivalent. Although the ultimate nature of the mind is emptiness, it is still covered with the adventitious defilements. By applying a powerful antidote, when those defilements have ceased, what you achieve after that is the adventitious purity. Although that is an emptiness, it is a cessation that comes about through the application of an antidote.

As such, liberation is the exhaustion or the cessation of karma and afflictions.

Khen Rinpoche: I'm not sure whether I am answering your question. I didn't get what your question was exactly, what you are asking.

Student: So basically the ultimate truth that is the purity of adventitious stains will be true cessations. But the ultimate truth that does not have the purity of adventitious stains is not true cessations.

So true cessations are necessarily an ultimate truth while the ultimate truth is not necessarily true cessations per se?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: We are now in the period of merit multiplying days.

We have learnt that wisdom is a mind and that there is the collection of wisdom.

But in terms of the collection of merit, what is merit exactly and what are we actually collecting? I remember that when we talked about merit, we talked about meritorious karma. If merit is necessarily karma and the Buddha had accumulated three countless great eons of merit, does that mean he created three countless great eons worth of karma? That is a bit....

Khen Rinpoche: A bit too long?

Student: We would end up saying that the Buddha has karma. I think many people cannot accept that. I don't remember hearing a definition of merit. Is merit equivalent to roots of virtue? What is merit and what does the collection of merit mean? We emphasize accumulating merit but when I ask around, people seem to interpret merit in different ways. I have not come across a definition of merit apart from being told it is a non-associated compositional

factor.

Answer: In a way, merit and virtue are similar. In general, virtue is virtuous karma, which is a cause for happiness, its fruitional effect. The thing that results in suffering is non-virtue or non-virtuous karma.

As for accumulating merit, I would think that that refers to doing something to accumulate merit and then an imprint is left on the mind. I think accumulating merit means that.

In the lam-rim, there are four permutations between karma that is created and karma that is accumulated. In the case of accumulating merit, one is creating merit but for it to become an accumulation, something has to be left on the mental continuum. So whether it is accumulating the collection of merit or accumulating the collection of wisdom, the mind is of primary importance because something has to be left on the mental continuum.

Whether it is accumulating prostrations or generating refuge, in order for a real impression to be left on the mind, in order for karma to be accumulated, as mentioned in the lam-rim, that activity has to be done with strength and over a long period of time. Then a real impression—an imprint—is left on the mind. This applies to any merit or virtue you are accumulating.

The collection of merit results in the form body. The collection of wisdom results in the truth body.

The key point I think is that in order for the activity to be an accumulation or the collection of merit, we need to make sure that a real impression or imprint is left on the mental continuum. I would think that the meaning of the word, 'accumulate' as in the phrase, 'accumulate the collection of merit,' means to do something over and over again such that a real impression or imprint is left on the mind. That is the meaning to accumulate.

Khen Rinpoche: What do you think?

Student: So when we say the Buddha accumulated three countless great eons of merit, he actually had three countless great eons of imprints as he had abandoned karma.

Answer: Unless you posit this collection to be form and I don't think you would do that, then there is no problem. No matter how you argue this point, there is no problem because it is a non-associated compositional factor.

Question: If an imprint is left behind after the action is done, since actions are impermanent phenomena that disintegrate, when we talk about imprints, are we referring to its factor of disintegratedness? If that is so, then an imprint is that factor of disintegratedness of the action itself?

Answer: That is another complicated issue.

Question: We seem to be using the terms—‘Buddha’ and ‘Buddha superior’ — interchangeably. Yet the definition of the final Buddha Jewel is the Buddha or his four bodies while the definition of the final Sangha Jewel is the Buddha superior or the enjoyment body and emanation body. That means in terms of these bodies, there is a difference between Buddha and the Buddha superior? Can I call the final Sangha Jewel, Buddha?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: So there is no difference in the bodies? Can I also call the final Buddha Jewel, Buddha superior?

Answer: In the first place, Buddha and Buddha superior are not the same. Buddha has a greater pervasion while Buddha superior has a smaller pervasion. All the four bodies are Buddha and all the four bodies are also the Buddha Jewel that are:

- the nature body that is the natural purity and the nature truth body that is adventitious purity
- the wisdom truth body
- the enjoyment body
- the emanation body

You have to understand that the Buddha superior is a person.

- As such, can the nature body that is the natural purity and the nature body that is an adventitious purity be a Buddha superior? Can the wisdom truth body be a Buddha superior? No.
- But are they Buddha? Yes.

These three—nature body that is natural purity, the nature body that is adventitious purity and the wisdom truth body—are Buddha but they are not the Buddha superior.

Why is that so? Because they are not persons.

- The nature body that is natural purity and the nature body that is adventitious purity are permanent. Therefore they cannot be persons.
- The wisdom truth body is a consciousness. As such, it cannot be a person either.

As for our founder, Shakyamuni Buddha, he is a Buddha superior and an enjoyment body as well. Shakyamuni Buddha is not his aggregates. He is that which is merely imputed in dependence upon his aggregates, the basis of designation. Shakyamuni Buddha’s form body is Buddha but you cannot say that his body aggregates are Buddha superior. It is the same as saying that you are not your body.

Question: Does the term ‘person’ include an enlightened being as well?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Since Buddha is all four bodies, wouldn't that make Buddha something that is both a permanent and impermanent phenomenon?

Answer: Possessing something doesn't mean it is that thing.

Khen Rinpoche: Did you get it?

Answer: If you possess something, are you necessarily that thing?

Khen Rinpoche: Yes or no? This is a question for you. For example?

A Buddha superior possesses the quality of true cessations but it is not the same as saying that a Buddha superior *is* true cessations. Likewise a Buddha superior possesses the quality of being uncompounded but it doesn't mean that he *is* uncompounded. A Buddha superior possesses qualities that are both compounded and uncompounded but a Buddha superior himself is not uncompounded.

Question: As the arya bodhisattva progresses along the path, the quality of his mind increases at every stage. How do you measure the quality of that mind in terms of its clarity, depth and profundity?

Answer: Take for example, a bodhisattva's mind that realizes emptiness as its object.

- On the path of accumulation, the mind in the continuum of a bodhisattva who understands emptiness is essentially a wisdom arisen from hearing and reflection.
- When a bodhisattva achieves the Mahayana path of preparation, then his mind realizing emptiness is a wisdom arisen from meditation. Within the path of preparation, there are four stages through which a bodhisattva is able to gradually deal with different layers of conceptions such as the conception of the apprehender and the conception of the apprehended.
- Comes the time when a bodhisattva realizes emptiness directly, he is on the path of seeing. His mind realizing emptiness is able to destroy the intellectually acquired apprehension of true existence.
- After realizing emptiness directly, conjoined with his collection of merit, a bodhisattva familiarizes himself over and over again with that realization. He is now on the path of meditation.
- Through that process of familiarization, as he moves towards the eighth ground, different levels of the apprehension of true existence are removed. Finally on the eighth ground, the apprehension of true existence is removed.
- But there is still more to be done. He has yet to remove the knowledge obscurations. The bodhisattva now progresses through the eighth, ninth and tenth grounds and removes the knowledge obscurations.

There is an extensive description of the many qualities achieved by the bodhisattvas on those ten grounds. For example, the bodhisattva on the first

ground is able to emanate a hundred bodies; on the second ground, he is able to emanate a thousand bodies; and on the third ground, he is able to emanate a hundred thousand bodies and so forth. The bodhisattva achieves many such qualities that are enhanced, becoming more and more greatly enhanced as he moves from a lower ground to a higher ground.

Furthermore, these ten grounds are associated with the achievement of the exalted practice of a particular perfection. For example, on the first ground, the bodhisattva achieves the exalted practice of the perfection of generosity and so forth.

It is good to have questions to help make things clearer.

This particular text is extremely difficult and challenging. It is really tough and difficult to understand. It is not possible to understand each and every single word.

What we can try to achieve here is for you to read the text on your own and then, combined with the explanation I am giving, for you to get a rough idea of what it is trying to say. This is what we are aiming for here. But in order for that to happen, you have to read the root text on your own so that when the explanation is given, you can refer to the root text, see what exactly is being said and look at the meaning of some of those words in the verses and so forth.

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## **SANGHA JEWEL**

### Verse 13

Obeisance to those who, having thoroughly realized the limit  
or quiescence of selflessness in all transmigrators  
Through perceiving the non-[inherent] existence of the  
entities of the afflictive emotions due to the natural clear  
light of the mind,  
Perceive perfect Buddhahood as residing in all, to those whose  
intelligence is unobstructed,  
And who are endowed with sight of the exalted wisdom that  
has as its objects the purity and infinity of sentient beings.

### *Eight qualities of the Sangha Jewel*

1. The quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena
2. The quality of the knowledge of the varieties or diversity of phenomena
3. The quality of inner knowledge (or the internal exalted wisdom)
4. The quality of being pure of attachment
5. The quality of being pure of obstructions (or impediments)
6. The quality of being pure of the lower (or inferior) obscurations.
7. The quality of knowledge
8. The quality of freedom

The first three can be subsumed under the quality of knowledge. The latter

three can be subsumed under the quality of freedom. If you enumerate the quality of knowledge and the quality of freedom, these are the eight qualities of the Sangha Jewel.

“Through perceiving the non-[inherent] existence of the entities of the afflictive emotions due to the natural clear light of the mind” refers to the knowledge of the mode of phenomena.

“The natural clear light of the mind”: This refers to the emptiness of the mind. The Sangha Jewel perceives this.

The mind is in the nature of clear light because the mind is empty of existing inherently. The Sangha Jewel sees this empty nature of the mind and it also perceives that the afflictions by nature are not established to be inherently existent. In other words:

- Because of the emptiness of the mind—i.e., the mind is empty of existing inherently—as such, the mind is in the nature of clear light. The nature of the mind is emptiness and the Sangha Jewel sees this as it is.
- Because the afflictive emotions are also not inherently established, they are adventitious. The afflictions are also in the nature of emptiness and the Sangha Jewel also sees them as they are.

The Sangha Jewel also recognises that these emptinesses and the emptiness of the minds of sentient beings are the same. With their knowledge of the mode of phenomena—seeing that the mind is in the nature of emptiness and that the afflictions are in the nature of emptiness—they see that something similar abides in the continua of all sentient beings. This is the knowledge of the varieties or diversity of phenomena—“having thoroughly realized the limit or quiescence of selflessness in all transmigrators,” they “perceive the perfect Buddhahood as residing in all.” Seeing that, they know that all sentient beings possess within them from the very beginning the quality that enables them to become buddhas.

Among all the qualities possessed by the Sangha Jewel, these two qualities—the quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena and the quality of the knowledge of the varieties or diversity of phenomena—are most important. By seeing that the nature of the mind is emptiness and that the ultimate nature of the afflictions themselves is also emptiness, they see that these qualities exist also in the continua of all sentient beings. They see that the buddha lineage pervades the continua of all sentient beings.

“To those whose intelligence is unobstructed”: This refers to the quality of freedom from attachment, obstructions (or impediments) and lower (or inferior) obscurations.

### *1. Knowledge of the mode of phenomena*

The next verse elaborates on the quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena.



## Verse 14

Because the perception of [their] internal exalted wisdom  
Of the mode and of the varieties is pure,  
The community of irreversible intelligent ones  
Is endowed with unsurpassed qualities.

## Verse 15

Due to realizing the quiescent nature of transmigrating beings,  
[that is, all persons and phenomena  
They [perceive] the very mode [of being of phenomena],  
This being because of the natural thorough purity  
And because the afflictive emotions are extinguished from the  
start.

“Transmigrating beings” refer to persons. “Due to realizing the quiescent nature of transmigrating beings, [that is, all persons and phenomena/ They [perceive] the very mode [of being of phenomena]”: By realizing the empty nature of a person, this realisation also includes realising the emptiness of phenomena other than persons, such as the aggregates that are the basis imputation of a person:

- This is “because of the natural thorough purity,” that is, they see the natural purity—the ultimate nature, the emptiness—of the mind.
- “And because the afflictive emotions are extinguished from the start” means that they see that the afflictions are by nature empty and as such, they are adventitious.

2. *Knowledge of the varieties or diversity of phenomena*

## Verse 16

Because the awareness realizing objects of knowledge and [their]  
finality  
Sees that the nature of omniscience  
Exists in all sentient beings,  
They have [knowledge of] the varieties.

The final object of knowledge is the final mode of abiding of all phenomena, essentially emptiness. They have the knowledge that realizes the final mode of abiding of the Buddha’s mind, i.e., the emptiness of the Buddha’s mind. They see that something similar pervades the continua of all sentient beings.

“Because the awareness realizing objects of knowledge and [their] finality sees that the nature of omniscience exists in all sentient beings,” as such, “They have [knowledge of] the varieties” of phenomena.

The wisdom that directly realizes the ultimate nature of all phenomena that exist in the continuum of a buddha realizes the emptiness of his mind. This wisdom realizing that emptiness, sees that something similar exists in the continua of all sentient beings.

A buddha’s wisdom that directly realizes the mode of phenomena also realizes

the diversity/varieties of phenomena. Only a buddha can do that. The wisdom of a non-buddha that realizes the mode of phenomena cannot realize the diversity of phenomena. A sentient being can only directly perceive the ultimate nature of all phenomena in meditative equipoise. Only when he arises from the meditative equipoise can he realize the diversity of phenomena. A buddha does not need to do that.

3. *Quality of inner knowledge (or internal exalted wisdom)*

Verse 17 (a,b)

Those realizations in that way

Are just perceptions by their own consciousness individually.

The superiors' direct knowledge of the modes and varieties of phenomena can only be experienced by them.

4–5. *Quality of being pure of attachment & quality of being pure of obstructiveness*

Verse 17 (c,d)

In the basic element of non-defilement there are no passions

And no obstacles, thus those are pure.

- “Passions” refer to attachment.
- “Obstacles” refer to the lower (or inferior) obstacles.
- “Thus those are pure” refer to the purities of these two.
- “There are no passions”: The absence of passion (or attachment) refers to the non-existence of the attachment holding on to truth.
- “No obstacles”: Because they do not have any obstacles to engaging with all phenomena as they are, they are free of obstacles and are pure in that sense.

It is also mentioned that in general:

- “Passions” (or attachment) refer to any of the afflictive obstructions.
- “Obstacles” (or obstructiveness) refer to the knowledge obscurations.

6. *Quality of being pure of the lower (or inferior) obstacles*

Verse 18

Because the sight of [these] wisdoms is pure,

It is [close to being] the unsurpassed wisdom of a Buddha.

Therefore, an irreversible Superior

Is a refuge for all embodied beings.

This verse talks about the quality of purity or freedom from the lower (or inferior) obstacles.

If you can, try to relate what I have said to the root text. What you have to know is that the Sangha Jewel is said to possess eight qualities.

| <b>THE EIGHT QUALITIES OF THE SANGHA</b> |                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                        | Quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena                | “Through perceiving the non-[inherent] existence of the entities of the afflictive emotions due to the natural clear light of the mind,” (Verse 13).                                           | The Sangha Jewel understands the true mode of existence of phenomena, that the nature of the mind is clear light and that the afflictions are empty of inherent existence and are, therefore, adventitious. “... natural clear light of the mind” means that the mind does not exist inherently and this accords with the way the mind exists in reality. | 1. Quality of knowledge. The first three qualities are subsumed under this quality.       |
| 2                                        | Quality of the knowledge of the diversity/varieties of phenomena | “Having thoroughly realized the limit or quiescence of selflessness in all transmigrators,” they then “perceive the perfect buddhahood as residing in all,” (Verse 13).                        | Through directly perceiving the final nature of the mind and its adventitious afflictions, the Sangha Jewel understands that all sentient beings are pervaded by buddha nature, the potential to attain enlightenment and become a buddha.                                                                                                                |                                                                                           |
| 3                                        | Quality of inner knowledge                                       | “Those realizations in that way are just perceptions by their own consciousness individually,” (Verse 17).                                                                                     | The superiors’ direct knowledge of the mode and varieties of phenomena are something that only the Sangha Jewel can experience.                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                           |
| 4                                        | Quality of being pure of attachment                              | “There are no passions,” (Verse 17).                                                                                                                                                           | “Passions” refer to the afflictive obstructions. Because the Sangha Jewel possesses the knowledge of the mode of phenomena, it is free from passions, the non-existence of the attachment holding onto truth [BP1 L6]                                                                                                                                     | 2. Quality of freedom. The fourth to the sixth qualities are subsumed Under this quality. |
| 5                                        | Quality of being pure of obstructiveness                         | “And no obstacles,” (Verse 17).                                                                                                                                                                | “Obstacles” refer to the knowledge obscurations. The Sangha Jewel possesses this quality because of its direct perception of the diversity of phenomena. Therefore, they do not possess any obstacles to engaging all phenomena as they are.                                                                                                              |                                                                                           |
| 6                                        | Quality of being pure of the lower obscurations                  | “Because the sight of [these] wisdoms is pure, it is [close to being] the unsurpassed wisdom of a Buddha. Therefore, an irreversible Superior is a refuge for all embodied beings.” (Verse 18) | This verse talks about the quality of purity or freedom from the lower (or inferior) obstacles.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                           |

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