

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 7

3 March 2015

Question & Answer. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 15—18. Sangha Jewel. Verse 19. General presentation of the Three Jewels: The Sangha Jewel must be a superior. Resultant and causal refuge. Conventional and ultimate refuge. Verse 20. Non-buddhas are not the ultimate objects of refuge.

Question: What is the difference between the factor of clarity and knowing versus the potential of the mind that makes it suitable to generate qualities?

Answer: We have seen how we can discuss the basic constituent or tathagata essence from the conventional perspective and from the ultimate perspective. Therefore the tathagata essence can be considered as compounded or un-compounded:

- The potential of the mind to transform into a buddha is its factor of being compounded.
- The factor of being un-compounded is basically the mind's emptiness of true existence. From the ultimate perspective, that is the tathagata essence.

When we consider the factor of clarity and awareness—the mind that is clear and knowing—there are many ways of looking at this.

Viewpoint of tantra

From the viewpoint of tantra, there is an explanation of the extremely subtle mind that is mounted on the extremely subtle wind. The factor of clarity and awareness of this extremely subtle mind goes all the way up to enlightenment.

What is the substantial cause of the wisdom truth body? It is this extremely subtle mind that is mounted on the extremely subtle wind.

When we posit this factor of clarity and awareness—the extremely subtle mind that is mounted on the extremely subtle wind—it becomes very easy to explain. From the perspective of tantra, this is posited as the buddha lineage that:

- goes all the way up to enlightenment
- acts as the substantial cause for the wisdom truth body

As such, one can say that from the time sentient beings were in existence, the potential for enlightenment has always been there. Therefore we can say that every sentient being has the potential to achieve enlightenment because every sentient being has this extremely subtle mind.

So if you look at it from the perspective of tantra, it is easier to explain.

Viewpoint of sutra

However, if we were to look at this issue from the perspective of sutra, when we refer to that which is clear and knowing, essentially we are talking about the mind that is able to experience, cognize and understand objects.

Having said that, then a question arises: Does the factor of clarity and awareness of ignorance go on to enlightenment? The factor of clarity and awareness of ignorance knows, cognizes and is aware of its object. The discussion becomes more difficult.

There are many afflictions; for example, the apprehension of true existence. That is a consciousness. If it is a consciousness, does it go on to enlightenment?

Is the apprehension of true existence a consciousness or not?

Isn't the very nature of this ignorance clear light? What do you think? Is the nature of ignorance clear light or not?

Student: The nature of ignorance is its emptiness.

Khen Rinpoche: Therefore it is in the nature of clear light. You have no choice but to say that.

Student: It is in the nature of clear light from the conventional perspective. The clear light mind is a conventional truth.

Khen Rinpoche: Is the nature of ignorance clear light or not?

Student: I would have to say yes because the nature of any phenomenon is in the nature of emptiness.

Khen Rinpoche: So it follows that ignorance goes on to enlightenment.

Student: Its emptiness goes on to enlightenment but ignorance has been eliminated.

Khen Rinpoche: The emptiness of ignorance and ignorance are one entity. They always go together. So for you, ignorance goes to enlightenment.

Student: I think it is the adventitious purity that goes on to enlightenment.

Khen Rinpoche: Does ignorance go on to enlightenment or not? Does the apprehension of true existence go on to enlightenment or not?

Student: Of course not!

Khen Rinpoche: But it follows that ignorance goes on to enlightenment because its nature is clear light. You asserted this just now.

Student: Then it would be wrong of me to make such an assertion if that was what I was thinking. What I think is this: Ignorance is the defilements. If we remove that, then we will eventually see the nature of clear light, emptiness. We will eventually see the adventitious purity of ignorance.

Khen Rinpoche: The apprehension of true existence is an adventitious stain?

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: So when that is purified, ignorance ceases.

Student: Yes.

Khen Rinpoche: If it ceases, how then does it go on to enlightenment?

Student: The emptiness of the mind ...

Khen Rinpoche: The point we are looking at is this: Does the emptiness of ignorance go on to enlightenment or not?

Student: If the emptiness of ignorance equals the adventitious purity or is equal to the emptiness of any phenomena, it would be the same emptiness all the way through.

Khen Rinpoche: Forget about emptiness! Because it itself is a stain, there is no adventitious purity yet. So now what we are left with is the emptiness of ignorance. Ignorance is empty by nature. Does the emptiness of ignorance go on to enlightenment or not?

Student: If the emptiness of ignorance and the emptiness of any other phenomenon are in fact the same emptiness, I would say ultimate nature would be one thing. If that assumption is correct, then that emptiness would go all the way up to enlightenment. I always thought that the ultimate nature and emptiness of any phenomenon are the same whereas it is the varieties of conventional truth that are different.

Khen Rinpoche: If you were to say that all emptinesses are the same, then the emptiness of ABC, the emptiness of the thangka and so forth would go on to enlightenment. You wouldn't say that a stone has the potential to become a buddha,

would you?

Student: Of course not! The stone is perceived by a consciousness. Otherwise it would not be a stone.

Khen Rinpoche: But according to what you have said earlier, it follows that a stone has buddha nature.

Student: No, no! The perceiver has buddha nature, not the object.

Khen Rinpoche: For you, it follows that the stone has buddha nature because the stone's emptiness *is* the tathagata essence.

Student: I understand what you are saying. But I was concentrating on the perceiver, the consciousness. For any object or phenomenon, it has to be perceived by the mind.

If ignorance is like a stone, of course it does not go on to enlightenment. It is the consciousness that would go on to enlightenment.

If ignorance were to go on to enlightenment, then every one of us would be enlightened by now!

Khen Rinpoche: But for you, ignorance does go on to enlightenment because the nature of ignorance is clear light!

What the teachings say about the tathagata essence is that it is the suchness of the mind. It doesn't say the suchness of a particular mind. It refers to the emptiness of the mind together with the mind itself. These two form the lineage that goes on to enlightenment.

Most of the proponents of Buddhist tenets all the way up to the Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS) assert that the person is the mental consciousness. Thus they would say that for those who believe in enlightenment, it is the mental consciousness that goes on to enlightenment because it is the person.

There are many different kinds of mind. Ignorance or the apprehension of true existence is just one of them.

I think one would have to say that the apprehension of true existence does not continue up to enlightenment because the apprehension of true existence is not the nature of the mind. It is an adventitious mind and as such, the apprehension of true existence is not the mode of apprehension of the mind.

Whether the statement—the nature of mind is clear light—can be applied to every single instance of mind or not, that is a big question.

As I have said, when we look at this from the perspective of tantra, it is much easier when we relate it to the extremely subtle mind. This mind has no beginning and has

no end. It doesn't die, nor was there a first moment of birth. This is the mind that goes on to enlightenment.

The proponents of the Sutra school, the Sautrantikas, assert that the mental consciousness is the person so for them, they would posit the mental consciousness to be the tathagata essence. The mental consciousness would be the buddha lineage.

For the proponents of the Mind Only school, there is a sub-school that, through their own analysis, conclude that there must be a separate consciousness that is called the mind-basis-of-all. Here when we talk about the buddha lineage, can this mind-basis-of-all be suitable to be transformed into a buddha?

The discussion about clear light nature of the mind and the meaning of the factor of clarity and awareness will be coming up soon. There are many things to think about.

Student: I had the mental conception of the basic constituent to be like space and the instances of the mind are like the objects that are appearing and disappearing from this space.

Khen Rinpoche: If you refer to that space to be emptiness, that is fine because everything is in the nature of emptiness. All conventional phenomena are in the nature of emptiness and they arise from emptiness.

Khen Rinpoche: *One question becomes many questions!*

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## **SANGHA JEWEL**

We have looked at the eight qualities of the Sangha Jewel. They are:

1. The quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena
2. The quality of the knowledge of the varieties of phenomena
3. The quality of inner knowledge
4. The quality of being pure of attachment
5. The quality of being pure of obstructions
6. The quality of being pure of the lower obscurations
7. The quality of knowledge
8. The quality of freedom

Six qualities can be subsumed into the quality of knowledge and the quality of freedom:

- The first three—the quality of knowledge of the mode of phenomena, the quality of the knowledge of the varieties of phenomena and the quality of inner knowledge—come under the quality of knowledge.
- The next three—the quality of being pure of attachment, the quality of being pure of obstructions and the quality of being pure of the lower obscurations—come under the quality of freedom.

*Quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena*

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.

“Due to realizing the quiescent nature of transmigrating beings”: “Transmigrating beings” generally refer to persons but here it refer to *both* the persons and their aggregates. In other words, the Sangha Jewel directly realizes “the quiescent nature” of these two.

Two reasons are given that explain why the Sangha Jewel have the quality of the knowledge of the mode of phenomena:

1. “This being because of the natural thorough purity,” that is, the emptiness of the mind.
2. “And because the afflictive emotions are extinguished from the start”: The afflictive emotions are by nature empty and have always been empty of existing inherently. Because the afflictive emotions are in the nature of emptiness, they were never established to be inherently existent right from the beginning. As such, afflictive emotions are adventitious.

*Quality of the knowledge of the varieties 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

We posit “the awareness realizing objects of knowledge and [their] finality” to be the exalted knower of all. This exalted knower of all—the omniscient mind—the final wisdom that sees the emptiness of a buddha’s mind, sees that something similar to this exist in the continua of all sentient beings. This exalted knower of all, the omniscient mind, is able to directly perceive or know the varieties of phenomena while in the state of perceiving the mode of phenomena. This is the meaning of Verse 16.

Based on what I have just said, now when you look at Verse 16, do you understand what it is saying? If you have read this verse prior to my explanation and you didn’t understand it but after my explanation, when you now read Verse 16, you get something out of it, then we have accomplished what we have set out to do.

This method of explanation of the qualities of the Sangha Jewel is in relation to a buddha. If the object is not a buddha but a sentient being, is this manner of explanation correct or incorrect?

- If you were to say that a sentient being could see the diversities of phenomena

while directly perceiving the mode of phenomenon, that is incorrect as only a buddha can do that.

- But if you were to say that a Sangha Jewel, who is a sentient being, perceives the mode of phenomenon while in meditative equipoise and perceives the varieties of phenomenon when he arises from that meditative equipoise and that this sentient being has buddha nature, then that is OK.

*Quality of inner knowledge*

Verse17 a,b

Those realizations in that way

Are just perceptions by their own consciousness individually.

These lines relate to the quality of inner knowledge.

*Quality of being pure of attachment*

Verse17 c,d

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

And no obstacles, thus those are pure.

“In the basic element of non-defilement”: This wisdom directly sees the mode of phenomena, so in this mind, “there are no passions” or attachment. Another way of saying this: Because the mind directly perceives the mode of phenomena, therefore there are no passions or attachment.

“And no obstacles, thus those are pure”: “Obstacles” here refer to the stains of obstructiveness. Because the wisdom that perceives the varieties or diversity of phenomena directly as they are, this mind encounters no obstructiveness in engaging with all phenomena. In that sense, there are “no obstacles.”

It is easy to explain this in relation to the final Sangha Jewel, a buddha:

- A buddha’s omniscient mind directly perceives the mode of phenomena. Because this wisdom directly perceives the mode of phenomena that is the ultimate nature of phenomena, it directly perceives the tathagata essence as it is. For such a mind, “there are no passions.” Here “passions” mean the apprehension of true existence. So for such a mind, there is no apprehension of true existence.
- Because a buddha’s wisdom directly perceives the varieties of phenomena—that is this wisdom faces no obstructiveness in engaging with all phenomena—it perceives the tathagata essence abiding in the continua of all sentient beings.

Therefore, “in this basic element of non-defilement, there are no passions and no obstacles, thus those are pure.”

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “In the basic element of non-defilement there are no passions ...” | “Passions” refer to the stain of attachment.       | The wisdom that directly perceives the mode of phenomena has no passions or attachment.                                                 |
| “And no obstacles ...”                                             | “Obstacles” refer to the stain of obstructiveness. | The wisdom that perceives all the varieties of phenomena directly faces no obstructiveness or obstacles in engaging with all phenomena. |

*Quality of being pure of obstructions*

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.

“Because the sight of [these] wisdoms is pure”: We can take the “wisdom” here to refer to the mind of a buddha that is pure because it has the quality of knowing the mode of phenomena, the quality of knowing the varieties of phenomena and the quality of inner knowledge.

The cause of this wisdom is the bodhisattvas abiding on the pure grounds, that is, the eighth, ninth and tenth grounds. They are close to enlightenment, “Therefore, an irreversible Superior/ Is a refuge for all embodied beings.”

If you look at the qualities of a Sangha Jewel from the perspective of the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), we are talking about a sentient being, not a buddha. A bodhisattva on the eighth ground has already abandoned the afflictive obscurations so such a bodhisattva is purified of “passions.” If we take the word “passions” to mean the afflictive obscurations, since the bodhisattva on the eighth ground has already been liberated from or are free of the afflictive obscurations, you could say that such a bodhisattva is free of “passions,” that is, it is purified of passions. In that sense, it is “pure.”

If we take “obstacles” to mean the knowledge obscurations, the bodhisattva on the eighth ground has started the process of removing the knowledge obscurations. In that sense, there are no obstacles as he has started the process of removing the knowledge obscurations.

You have to understand these terms correctly:

- The word “passions” mean the afflictive obscurations.
  - “Obstacles” mean the knowledge obscurations.
  - The bodhisattva has started the process of removing the knowledge obscurations from the eighth ground onwards. As such, there are no obstacles.
- This is not to say that the bodhisattva on the eighth ground does not have any more knowledge obscurations. Only that he has started the process of removing them.

The bodhisattva on the eighth, ninth and tenth grounds progressively removes different levels of the knowledge obscurations, achieving the cessation of those knowledge obscurations as he moves along. Depending on which ground he is on, he has definitely removed some level of knowledge obscurations. You have to understand it in that way. We are not saying that the bodhisattva superior does not have any knowledge obscurations.

*Quality of being pure of the lower obscurations*

An example of a lower (or inferior) obscuration would be the obscuration of wanting to experience the bliss of peace oneself alone. This is how my teacher explained it. This is what is usually said when these are taught. I have not seen



anything written on them specifically in the texts.

In the commentary on this *Sublime Continuum*, the inferior obscurations are posited to be those obscurations that are abandoned before the eighth ground:

- They are ‘inferior’ because these obscurations are purified before the eighth ground.
- Because these obscurations that are to be abandoned prior to the achievement of the eighth ground obstruct the achievement of the eighth ground, therefore they are ‘obscurations’.

Putting them together, then they are inferior obscurations.

“Because the sight of [these] wisdom is pure”: If we explain this wisdom to be the wisdom that realizes the modes and varieties of phenomena in the continua of the bodhisattvas on the pure grounds as the cause of enlightenment, then these bodhisattvas abiding on the pure grounds “is a refuge for all embodied things.”

### THE THREE JEWELS: GENERAL PRESENTATION

Verse 19

In order to [show the qualities of] teacher, teaching, and learners

The Three Refuges were posited

In terms of those of the three vehicles

And those devoted to the three observances [of the individual refuges].

There is a way of positing the Three Jewels (or the Three Rare Sublime Ones) in relation to the three lineages:

1. the hearers’ lineage
  2. the solitary realizers’ lineage and
  3. the Mahayana lineage
- For those of the hearers’ lineage, they are principally looking to achieve the state of the foe destroyer Sangha. As such, the Sangha Jewel is shown and taught.
  - For those of the solitary realizers’ lineage, they are principally looking for liberation. As such, the ultimate Dharma Jewel—true paths and true cessations—is shown and taught.
  - For those of the Mahayana lineage, their principal object of achievement and their main goal is omniscience, full enlightenment or buddhahood. For them, the resultant refuge, the Buddha Jewel, is shown and taught.

For those who have yet to enter the path, how are the Three Jewels explained to such people? One can make offerings in relation to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. As such, the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—are taught as well.

Why is there a presentation of the Three Jewels? In one way, it is because of the aspirations of the persons belonging to the different lineages: the Mahayana, the solitary realizers and the hearers. Because of their aspirations and their goals, there is a presentation of the Three Jewels for them.

*The Sangha Jewel must be a superior*

There is a system of strictly positing the Sangha Jewel to be a superior. It cannot be an ordinary being. Why is this so? Because only a superior does not have any doubts with regard to refuge in the Three Jewels. Because a superior is never separated from the Three Jewels, as such, the Sangha Jewel has to be a superior. An ordinary being can never be posited to be a Sangha Jewel because it is possible for an ordinary being to follow a teacher other than the Buddha.

Having said that, are the bodhisattvas on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation necessarily Buddhists?

*Khen Rinpoche: What do you think? Do they have to be Buddhists or not? Does a bodhisattva have to be a Buddhist? Yes or No?*

*Student:* Maybe not. For example, Mother Teresa.

*Khen Rinpoche: I thought you were going to give the example, me!*

The bodhicitta of the bodhisattvas is focusing on the state of full enlightenment. They are aspiring to become buddhas. Can you aspire to be something that you do not know? If you don't have faith in the Buddha, you cannot possibly aspire to be a buddha. If you don't have a wish to be a buddha, there is no way bodhicitta can be generated. If you have faith in the Buddha, then you are a Buddhist.

It is stated here that the Sangha Jewel has to be a superior because a superior does not have any doubts about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In that sense, he will never change. It is possible that an ordinary being may follow after a teacher or founder other than the Buddha.

The object of refuge to which we entrust ourselves has to be stable and unchanging. It would be strange if we were to entrust ourselves to or take refuge in an object that changes. Going by this, then the bodhisattvas on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation do not fit the criteria.

*More about refuge*

*~ Causal refuge and resultant refuge*

You should remember that you can consider refuge from a causal point of view or from a resultant point of view.

The resultant Three Jewels are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that you have yet to achieve, i.e., they are what you will become in the future. In your mind if you hold on to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as the objects of refuge that you will become in the future, if you mentally accept that and also verbalize it, that is going for resultant refuge.

The causal refuge refers to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that are already established in the continuum of someone other than yourself. If you have faith in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that is already established in someone else's mental

continuum, when you acknowledge and entrust yourself to them, and you also verbalize this, that is what we call going for causal refuge or taking causal refuge. You accept that:

- the Buddha that is established in someone else’s continuum to be the founder, the person who shows refuge
- the Dharma that is established in someone else’s continuum as the actual refuge
- the Sangha that is established in someone else’s continuum as the helper or the person who helps you with your practice of refuge

In the prayer that is commonly recited—“I go for refuge until I am enlightened/ To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha”—that indicates causal refuge. The last two lines—“By my practice of giving and the other perfections, / May I become a buddha to benefit all sentient beings”—shows resultant refuge.

~ *Conventional refuge and ultimate refuge*

You also need to know that refuge can be classified as conventional refuge or ultimate refuge.

The superiors such as the bodhisattva superiors are not ultimate refuge objects; they are conventional objects of refuge. Likewise the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of such superiors are also not ultimate refuge objects.

These superiors and the true paths and true cessations in their continuum are objects of refuge but they are not the final refuge objects. They are conventional refuge objects because they are temporary in that they have yet to reach their fullest potential. For example, the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a superior are not at their highest possible level. As such, they are not final and in that sense, are still temporary. The true paths and true cessations in the continua of these superiors can still be improved upon. As such, they are not ultimate or final but just temporary.

The ultimate refuge object is only the Buddha.

*Non-buddhas are not the ultimate refuge objects*

Verse 20 is saying that all non-buddhas are not the ultimate refuge objects .

Verse 20

Because [the verbal doctrine is] abandoned, because [the realizational doctrine in the continuum of a Bodhisattva Superior] has the quality of deception,

Because [a cessation is] a [mere] non-existence, and [non-Buddhas] have fright,

The two forms of doctrine and the community of Superiors [Respectively] are not the supreme eternal refuge.

There are a few reasons or proofs that show why non-buddhas are not the final or ultimate objects of refuge. The reasons all start with the word, “because ...” of this, and “because ...” of that. Those are the reasons.

“Because [the verbal doctrine is] abandoned”: What is abandoned is the collection of

words or texts that we can see and the sounds we can hear, which are usually considered to be the Dharma Jewel. These are not ultimate objects of refuge for they are abandoned when we become enlightened. We only rely on them to reach our goal for when we have achieved enlightenment, the final object of achievement, we do not need to depend on them anymore.

Just like a person who crosses a vast ocean on a boat, once he reaches the shore, he doesn't need the boat anymore unless he decides to return to the other side of the ocean again! But after achieving enlightenment, you will need to teach your disciples by using words.

“Because the [realisational doctrine in the continuum of a Bodhisattva Superior] has the quality of deception”: Although the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior is a true path and it is an object of refuge, but not a final object of refuge. It is not ultimate because it has the quality of deception.

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Question: Are the subtle knowledge obscurations that motivate pure karma the same as the knowledge obscurations abandoned by the bodhisattva superior on the eighth to the tenth grounds?

Answer: This is something that we can think about. According to the proponents of the Consequence Middle Way School, the Prasangikas, a knowledge obscuration is not a consciousness. Rather it is a predisposition.

- According to them, the apprehension of a self or person and the apprehension of phenomena are not posited to be knowledge obscurations. These two are consciousnesses and are posited to be afflictive obscurations.
- Knowledge obscurations are posited to be the predispositions or imprints of the apprehension of true existence.

When we discuss the twelve links of dependent origination, the usual presentation is from the perspective of the afflictive obscurations. But there is also the twelve links of dependent origination that are included in the knowledge obscurations. In that discussion, there is something that motivates the accumulation of uncontaminated karma. The very thing that motivates the accumulation of uncontaminated karma is subtle effort. This accumulation of uncontaminated karma does not come about as the result of the coarse afflictive obscurations. Subtle effort is required. This subtle effort arises through the force of the knowledge obscurations.

The question then arises: Is this subtle effort that gives rise to the accumulation of uncontaminated karma equivalent to the knowledge obscurations? This is one discussion. If effort is consciousness and if subtle effort is posited to be the knowledge obscurations, would that not make the knowledge obscurations consciousnesses too?

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