

## **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 Gyalsab Je’s Commentary to the First Chapter, translated by Gavin Kilty (*The Tathagata Essence, Commentary to the First Chapter* by Gyalsap Darma Rinchen © FPMT, Inc. January 2007).

### **Lesson 8**

**10 March 2015**

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Explaining the verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*: “A star.” “A visual aberration.” Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 20—25. Verse 20: Why the Dharma Jewel and the Sangha Jewel are not the final objects of refuge. Verse 21: Only the Buddha is the final object of refuge. Verse 22: Etymology of ‘Jewel’. Verses 23—25: The inconceivable basic constituent.

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### **EXPLAINING THE VERSE FROM THE VAJRA CUTTER SUTRA**

Every time before class begins we recite this verse that comes from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*:

A star, a visual aberration, a flame of a lamp,  
An illusion, a drop of dew, or a bubble,  
A dream, a flash of lightning, a cloud –  
See conditioned things as such!

*The analogy of “a star”*

The verse starts with “a star.” This is analogous of how the two levels of reality or two levels of truths are complete within any specific phenomenon.

When we looked at the seven diamond topics, we saw how they could be discussed from an ultimate perspective or a conventional perspective. It is said that within each and every single phenomenon, there are these two levels of truths that are related to the mind to which they appear:

- There is a level of truth that appears to the non-conceptual wisdom, specifically the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. This level of reality, the appearance to the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, is an ultimate truth.
- Then there is another level of truth that appears to a mind called a conventional valid cognizer. This is essentially a valid cognizer in the continuum of a non-

superior, someone who has not directly realized emptiness. This level of reality is the conventional truth (or obscurational truth or concealer truth).

For example, take the wisdom directly perceiving the emptiness of the person. It is said that in the perspective of this wisdom, the person does *not* appear. Instead what appears to this mind is the mere emptiness of inherent existence. What appears to this mind is the mere negation of true existence, i.e., the emptiness of true existence.

Although the person does not appear to the wisdom directly perceiving the emptiness of a person, this is not to say that the person does not exist. The person exists but the person does not appear to the perspective of this wisdom directly perceiving the emptiness of a person.

To illustrate how only the emptiness of true existence appears in the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, the example of “a star” is given. The stars are up there in the sky but they are not seen during daytime. We don’t see stars during the day not because they are not there.

Rather what appears during daytime is the mere absence of obstructiveness. This is analogous of what appears to the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. When we look at the sky during daytime, what we see is just vacuity or space, an ordinary emptiness with nothing there. This is analogous of how nothing appears except emptiness to the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.

In the perspective of this wisdom, only the mere negation of the object of negation, the emptiness of true existence, appears. In this case, the basis of designation, the person, does not appear to the perspective of the wisdom directly realizing the emptiness of the person. This is what is said in the teachings about the manner of appearance to a wisdom directly perceiving emptiness. The analogy of a star is used to illustrate this.

On the other hand, a great diversity of phenomena appears to the conventional valid cognizers, i.e., those valid cognisers who do not realise emptiness. What appear to conventional valid cognizers are conventional phenomena.

When we talk about consciousnesses (or minds) that do not have emptiness as their object, these minds that do not realize emptiness can be valid cognizers but they can be a correctly assuming consciousness, doubt or even a wrong consciousness. There are many possibilities when we talk about minds that do not realize emptiness. The mistaken states of consciousness—wrong consciousnesses, mistaken consciousnesses and, in particular, those consciousnesses that are polluted by the apprehension of true existence—experience a whole variety of mistaken and wrong appearances.

When we talk about conventional minds—the minds that do not realize emptiness—there are instances whereby phenomena conventionally exist in the way that they appear. There is some kind of conventional reality there. But this is not necessarily so as there are also many instances whereby the manner of appearance does not reflect the reality. There is a whole range of different possibilities of how phenomena can

appear to conventional minds.

But if we are talking about conventional valid cognizers, there is a way of in which a phenomenon appears to conventional valid cognizers. We need to posit a level of reality in relation to a conventional valid cognizer.

For example, the person appears to the perspective of a conventional valid cognizer realizing a person. Just as the person *appears* to this conventional valid cognizer apprehending a person, this person exists. We need to be able to posit that the person exists and functions.

In the analogy of a star, we do not see stars during the daytime. But after the sun sets and the sky is dark, suddenly we see a whole constellation of many stars. This is analogous of how a great diversity of phenomena appears to the conventional valid cognizer.

In essence, the analogy of a star illustrates how, with regard to any given phenomenon, there is a coming together of appearance and emptiness:

- There is one level of reality that appears to the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness that is an ultimate truth.
- There is another level of reality that appears to a conventional valid cognizer that is a conventional truth.

*The analogy of “a visual aberration”*

Having said that about a conventional truth, it should be noted that, for example, in the case of a conventional valid cognizer realizing a person, the person does exist and functions. But this is not to say that whatever appears to a conventional valid cognizer is *necessarily* an accurate depiction of how the phenomenon in question exists.

*Khen Rinpoche: Do you understand what I am saying?*

Those of you who have studied tenets should know this already. It is clearly asserted by the Consequence Middle Way School that in relation to a sentient being, all consciousnesses—with the exception of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness—are *necessarily* mistaken. For those of you who have studied tenets earlier, this is what you should understand immediately in relation to what I have just explained.

So to recap, whatever appears to a conventional valid cognizer, that appearance is not necessarily an accurate depiction of the reality or the truth of the phenomenon in question because all consciousnesses of sentient beings—with the exception of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness—are polluted by the latencies of ignorance. Whatever appears to these consciousnesses always appears to exist from its own side, although in reality that is not the case. In other words, whatever appears to a conventional valid cognizer appears to be truly existent, to exist inherently, to exist truly and to exist right there from its own side. From the perspective of the Consequence Middle Way school, all these different expressions mean the same thing.

Do the phenomena in question exist in the way they appear? They appear to exist truly but do they exist truly? The answer is no. It is said that phenomena do not exist in the way they appear but everything that appears to the conventional valid cognizer appears to exist from its own side under its own power.

If these phenomena that appear to exist from their own side really do exist from their own side—if that is the truth and whatever appears is *necessarily* how it exists—that means not only do phenomena *appear* to exist truly, they are indeed truly existent or inherently existent. Then that must be the ultimate or final nature, the final mode of being or existence of those phenomena, their deepest nature.

Then if that is the case, then that ultimate mode of being of those phenomena—if they really exist in that way—*must* appear to the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness.

In short, the phenomena that appear to the conventional valid cognizer to exist from their own side and to be truly existent in reality do *not* exist in that way. They do not exist from their own side. They do not exist truly. As such, there is a disparity between appearance and reality, i.e., although that is not the reality of the ultimate mode of being of phenomena but that is how they appear. The analogy of “a visual aberration” is used to illustrate this.

We can continue with the rest of this verse if we find the time do so in the future. I thought it is important and good to have some idea about the two truths because the two truths are often discussed in many contexts, even in this text.

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*Why the Dharma Jewel and the Sangha Jewel are not final objects of refuge*

Verse 20 is a discussion of the conventional object of refuge.

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.

“Because [the verbal doctrine is] abandoned”: What is abandoned here is the scriptural Dharma, what we can read, study and listen to. Once you have achieved the final fruit, you do not need to rely on the scriptural Dharma to maintain your achievement. It is like having to rely on a boat to cross the ocean. Once you have crossed the ocean and reached the other shore, you do not need the boat anymore. You leave the boat behind and move on. Likewise when you have achieved the final fruit, you do not need to rely on the scriptural Dharma because you have achieved your goal.

Here we are talking about the Three Jewels, in particular the Dharma Jewel. When we talk about the objects of refuge there are many ways of looking at them. Likewise for the Dharma Jewel, there is the conventional Dharma Jewel and the ultimate Dharma Jewel. In this case, the scriptural Dharma is a temporary object of refuge and there is no need to hold on to it forever.

“Because [the realizational doctrine in the continuum of a Bodhisattva Superior] has the quality of deception”: “The realizational doctrine” here refers to the true paths, the realizational Dharma Jewel, i.e., the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior. This wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior is not the final object of refuge because this wisdom has “the quality of deception.”

In general, composed or impermanent phenomena have the “quality of deception” because composed phenomena undergo change. Therefore they are not reliable and are not stable.

Some expert commentators have explained this section in this way: “The realizational doctrine” here is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior that has the quality of deception. Therefore these true paths in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior, this realizational Dharma Jewel, are not the final objects of refuge. Why? Because they have the quality of deception, meaning they are changeable and unstable. As such, they would also have to say that the form bodies, i.e., the emanation body and enjoyment body and the wisdom truth body, which are all composed phenomena that undergo change, are not reliable objects of refuge. They end up by saying that only emptiness is the real object of refuge.

Gyaltsab Je disputes this explanation. How then should we understand this “quality of deception”? In the perspective of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior, there is the appearance of a complete absence of any stains. Although there is this *appearance* of the absence of stains, in reality, this is not the case. This is because this mind—the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior—has not finished its task of removing all its stains. There are still stains to be removed and this bodhisattva superior still has more work to do.

Therefore this mind—the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of the bodhisattva superior—has yet to be transformed from a mind with stains into a mind that is completely free of stains. The point is that the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior is still a mind with defilements, i.e., it has yet to be separated from all defilements, and there is still some way to go before that mind is free of all defilements. As such, this mind is not the final object of refuge.

You have to know that:

- the scriptural Dharma is not the final object of refuge.
- the realisational Dharma, in the form of the true paths in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior, is also not the final object of refuge.

Then what about true cessations? There is a Dharma Jewel that is true cessations.

“Because [a cessation is] a [mere] non-existence”: “[A cessation]” here refers to the nirvana without remainder that is a true cessation, the mere abandonment of the afflictions and suffering.

The key word here is “[mere].” What does it suggest? It suggests that there are still knowledge obscurations that have to be abandoned and as such, it is not a final object of refuge. The nirvana without remainder is a true cessation but nonetheless it is not the final object of refuge.

So up to this point in the verse, it is saying that the Dharma Jewel is not the final object of refuge. While the Dharma Jewel may not be the final object of refuge that is not to say that it is not an actual refuge. You must make a clear distinction between an actual refuge and the final object of refuge. The Dharma Jewel is our actual refuge, the real protection, but the Dharma Jewel is not the final object of refuge.

“[Non-Buddhas] have fright”: The hearer foe destroyers and solitary realizer foe destroyers are Sangha Jewels but they are not final objects of refuge. Why? Because they “have fright” or fear. Why are these Sangha Jewels not the final objects of refuge? Because the hearer foe destroyers and solitary realizer foe destroyers still have the knowledge obscurations.

In short:

- The scriptural Dharma is not the final object of refuge.
- The realisational Dharma is not the final object of refuge.
- True cessations are not the final objects of refuge.
- All non-buddha superiors are not final objects of refuge.

This is where some of the material that were covered in the tenets module would be useful. You need to be very clear about them. Otherwise it will be very confusing.

#### *Revisiting tenets*

There are different assertions according to the four Buddhist tenets. Many assert that there are three final vehicles whereas there is also the assertion that there is only one final vehicle. If you do not understand that there are differing views as to how many final vehicles there are, then you will be confused. These topics were already covered in the tenets module and it will be good to revisit them on your own.

There are proponents of:

- the Great Exposition school
- the Sutra school
- the Mind Only school
- the Autonomy Middle Way school
- the Consequence Middle Way school

What are their assertions? Who asserts that there are three final vehicles? Who asserts there is one final vehicle? What are the reasons for their respective assertions?

The proponents of the Hinayana tenets basically assert that when the nirvana without remainder is attained, the person ceases to exist and the continuum is severed.

Then in the divisions of the Mahayana tenets, even within the Mind Only school, there are those who propound that the continuum of the person is severed and there are others who propound that the continuum is not severed.

According to the proponents of the Mahayana tenets, among the proponents of the Middle Way schools, which is the highest tenet system, they assert that there is just one final vehicle. Many reasons are put forth to explain why when the nirvana without remainder is attained, the person still exists and the continuum of the person is not severed. There are also reasons to show that if you were to assert that the continuum of the person is severed after achieving nirvana, you will encounter many logical fallacies, problems and inconsistencies. There is much analysis and discussion of this issue.

In essence, the reality is that the continuum of the person is not severed and there is one final vehicle for everyone. As such, from the perspective of this treatise, the *Sublime Continuum*—which adopts the position and perspective of one final vehicle for everyone—even those who have achieved the arhatship of the hearer foe destroyers and solitary realizer foe destroyers are not considered to be the final objects of refuge. These hearer foe destroyers and solitary realizer foe destroyers still have the knowledge obscurations within them. Therefore it is said that they will have to enter the Mahayana path to remove these obscurations. Only then will they become buddhas and only then will they become final objects of refuge. Before that, they are not final objects of refuge.

If you have studied tenets, you should have some idea what is the difference between nirvana with remainder and nirvana without remainder and the many assertions according to the various tenets. If you don't remember these things, then seeing the words, 'nirvana with remainder' and 'nirvana without remainder' will not make much sense.

This is why I have mentioned that if you really want to learn, you have to understand that real learning is not an easy thing. There is no way you can really learn by focusing on just one area or one particular topic in the entire Buddhadharma. You cannot expect to know everything by studying just one text. It is impossible. It doesn't work that way because everything is interconnected.

You have to learn the various topics and not forget what you have learnt because you need to put everything together. Otherwise just hoping to learn something from whatever topic comes along, I think that is not going to work. Therefore you really have to work at remembering and not forgetting the material that you have learnt earlier.

If you have forgotten what you have learnt earlier, there is no benefit in just sitting there and feeling discouraged. That also doesn't help. Rather than feeling disheartened, why not think about what you can do to correct the situation?

*Only the Buddha is the final object of refuge*

Verse 21 is saying in a brief way that only the Buddha is the final object of refuge.

Verse 21

Ultimately the refuge of transmigrators

Is just the sole Buddha,

Because the Subduer has the Body of Doctrine [and thus is the  
doctrine]

And because [a Buddha] is the finality of the Community.

Ultimately the refuge of all sentient beings is only the Buddha, no one else. Why? Because the Buddha has achieved the dharmakaya that is separated from or free of all fears.

“And because [a Buddha] is the finality of the Community”: The “Community” here refers to the Sangha Jewel.

Our kind teacher and founder, Shakyamuni Buddha, has achieved a state of existence that is separate from our continuum. It is an achievement achieved by someone other than ourselves. That is causal refuge, the refuge existing in the continuum of someone else.

Every sentient being up to the superior who is at the end of the continuum of being a sentient being, i.e., one moment before enlightenment is achieved, still have to work towards attaining the dharmakaya, the resultant refuge, which they have yet to achieve. Everyone else, including the superiors, is aiming to achieve the state that is similar to what Shakyamuni Buddha has achieved, i.e., the resultant refuge.

The conclusion then is that only the Buddha is the final object of refuge. In order to be a final object of refuge, he has to be free from all fears and he has to be free of all partiality. The final object of refuge helps without considering whether the person that he is helping has helped him in return or has harmed him. There are no such considerations.

*Etymology of ‘Jewel’*

Verse 22 discusses the etymology of ‘Jewel’ or the ‘Rare Sublime One.’

Verse 22

Because of appearing rarely, because of being without defilement,

Because of having power, because of being the ornament of the  
world,

Because of being just superior, and because of being changeless,

[They are called] Jewels [literally, Superior Rarities].

Up to this point, the discussion of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are the Three Jewels that have yet to happen. They are the first three of the seven vajra topics or essential points.

What follows next is the fourth vajra topic, the basic constituent. This is difficult.



Verse 23 states that the basic constituent is inconceivable.

Verse 24 states that because it is inconceivable, therefore it is the object of only the buddhas.

Verse 25 states the proof for its inconceivability.

Verse 25

Because [the basic realm is] pure but [appears to be] afflicted,  
 Because [enlightenment is] unafflicted but [appears] to be purified,  
 Because [the Buddha qualities are] undifferentiated phenomena [even at the  
 time of common being but are not manifest],  
 And because [the Buddha activities are] spontaneous but without  
 conceptuality [these four are inconceivable by common beings].

The section on the basic constituent is really challenging so we will start on that in the next lesson. Now we have finished with the discussion of the Three Jewels. If you have questions about the Three Jewels, you can ask.



*Question:* What are the knowledge obscurations that remain in the state of nirvana without remainder or in the state of the cessation of suffering?

*Answer:* It is difficult to explain everything right away because there are so many things that need to be explained prior to that.

Firstly, one has to know that the proponents of Hinayana tenets do not assert a presentation of knowledge obscurations.

The proponents of Mahayana tenets do assert knowledge obscurations but they have different presentations of what constitutes knowledge obscurations. The Mind Only School has their own take on this as do the proponents of the Autonomy Middle Way school, the Autonomists and so forth. So let us assume here that we have sorted everything out and that we adopt the final highest position.

There are many ways of positing ignorance. If you take ignorance here to mean the apprehension of true existence, there is the apprehension of true existence that is in the form of a seed. The knowledge obscurations refer to the predispositions or the imprints left on the mental continuum by this apprehension of true existence. In short, knowledge obscurations are the predispositions of ignorance.

We then need to understand the difference between a seed and a predisposition. What is the seed of the apprehension of true existence? What is the predisposition of the apprehension of true existence?:

- The seed of the apprehension of true existence is the potential that has the ability to give rise to a new moment or a fresh moment of the apprehension of true existence.
- The predisposition of the apprehension of true existence cannot and does not

produce a new moment of an apprehension of true existence. Instead what it gives rise to is an *appearance* of true existence.

In short, according to the Middle Way Consequentialists who hold the highest view, the potential that gives rise to this appearance of true existence is posited as knowledge obscurations.

*Question:* What is the relationship between realizing the emptiness of inherent existence and realizing that attachment is the cause of all suffering as presented in the Buddha’s four noble truths?

*Answer:* Maybe I will answer that in the next lesson.

|                     |                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Dharma Jewel</b> | The scriptural Dharma is not the final object of refuge because ...                                                                               | when you have achieved the final fruit, you do not need to rely on the scriptural Dharma anymore.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                     | The true paths, the realizational Dharma, are not the final objects of refuge because ...                                                         | the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior has not finished the task of removing all stains (or defilements). The bodhisattva superior still have some work to do to transform that mind that has stains into a mind that is completely free of all stains. |
|                     | The nirvana without remainder is a true cessation that is not the final object of refuge because ...                                              | it is essentially the mere abandonment of afflictions and suffering. There are still knowledge obscurations that have to be abandoned.                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Sangha Jewel</b> | All non-buddha superiors, such as the hearer foe destroyers and solitary realizer foe destroyers, are not the final objects of refuge because ... | they still have the knowledge obscurations so they will have to enter the Mahayana path to remove them. Only then can they become buddhas and only then can they become a final object of refuge. Before that, they are not.                                                                         |
| <b>Buddha Jewel</b> | Only the Buddha is the final object of refuge because ...                                                                                         | the Buddha has achieved the dharmakaya, that is separated from or free of all fears.                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |



**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- Mani Retreat in Kopan Monastery, Nepal from 16—28 October.  
Khen Rinpoche is organizing and leading a Mani Retreat with a target of 10 million Mani recitations. Each participant has to recite a minimum of 100,000 Manis, which Khen Rinpoche said is easily achievable within the retreat period allocated. The retreat will be followed by two days (27—28 October) of pilgrimage, which is optional. Estimated cost of airfare, food and lodging, travel insurance, pilgrimage expenses and offerings is between S\$1600—1800.

Registration starts from 17 March and closes on 30 April. There will be a non-refundable deposit of \$500. Those with their own travel insurance policy will have to produce a copy to the organizers for refund. This retreat is a retreat in noble silence except for a break time of two hours during lunch.

- Yamantaka Retreat in Kopan Monastery, Nepal from 17 October for 15 days and one day for the fire puja. Venue will be the small gompa beneath the Chenrezig gompa. Restricted to maximum of 20 participants.
- Jangchup Lamrim teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama from 24—28 December at Bylakuppe Tibetan Settlement in South India. Details to follow.
- Kalachakra Initiation by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Bodhgaya in early January 2016. Details to follow.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Patricia Lee & Julia Koh; edited by Cecilia Tsong.