

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 10

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Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Reviewing Verse 22: Etymology of 'Jewel'. Verses 23-25. The fourth vajra topic: the basic constituent. Summary of these verses.

REVIEWING VERSE 22

Etymology of 'Jewel'

Verse 22 looks at the etymology of 'Jewel', or literally, a 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].

"Because of appearing rarely": Just as it is very difficult and rare to be able to possess a wish-fulfilling jewel, actually it is very rare for a buddha to descend and come to a world system. At this time, when we have some slight idea of what a buddha is, it becomes very important then for us to take refuge in the Buddha.

In any particular world system, there are four periods:

1. the eon of formation
2. the eon of abiding
3. the eon of destruction
4. the eon of nothingness

During this very long period of time, a buddha only appears during the eon of abiding. Furthermore, a buddha comes in the eon of abiding when the lifespan of human being are on the decline. So the coming of a buddha is extremely rare. We have met the teachings of the Buddha so it becomes very important for us to

generate pure refuge in him.

“Because of being without defilement”: The Buddha is like a perfect wish-fulfilling jewel, which is free of all faults and stains. Likewise, the Buddha is without defilement because he does not possess any faults; so he does not possess the faults of not being able to protect us or grant us refuge. Therefore, it is inappropriate for us to entrust ourselves to or take refuge in worldly gods or deities. Such beings are not able to protect us or fully guide us because they possess faults unlike the Buddha who is without defilement. The point is that we should not entrust ourselves to or take refuge in worldly gods, but rather, we should go for refuge and entrust ourselves to the Buddha.

“Because of having power”: Here, the Buddha is likened again to a wish-fulfilling jewel, which has the power to grant us the necessities of life and enjoyments if you pray to it. Likewise, the Buddha has powers such as the five types of super knowledges and so forth. As such, the Buddha can act as our guide and our refuge.

“Because of being the ornament of the world”: If we possessed a wish-fulfilling jewel, then we would have the best worldly ornament. Likewise, if we depend on the Buddha, who is like an “ornament of the world,” and take wholehearted and sincere refuge in him, we can achieve all the goals and purposes, that is, the temporal goodness or provisional goals and the definite goodness or definite excellence.

“Because of being just superior”: Just as a wish-fulfilling jewel is superior to all other kinds of jewels, the Buddha is superior to all other objects of refuge. Among all the sources of protection or objects of refuge, the Buddha is unparalleled.

“Because of being changeless”: A wish-fulfilling jewel is also changeless. Regardless of what we may do to it, it remains a wish-fulfilling jewel. Likewise, the Buddha is neither affected by praise nor criticism. Whether you praise or criticise the Buddha, it does not matter to him because he does not possess any partiality. As such, he is able to grant refuge to all who seek it.

This is an explanation of the word, ‘Jewel’ or the ‘Rare Sublime One,’ using the analogy of the wish-fulfilling jewel.

So up to here in the text, the first three of the seven vajra topics have been discussed. Next, we will start with the fourth vajra topic, the basic constituent.

THE FOURTH VAJRA TOPIC: THE BASIC CONSTITUENT

Verse 23 refers to the inconceivable nature of the causes and conditions for the arising of the three virtuous Jewels.

Verse 23

Those from which the three virtuous Jewels arise
Reality with defilement and without defilement,
The qualities of undefiled Buddhahood, and the Conqueror’s activities—
Are objects just of those [directly] perceiving the ultimate.

“Reality with defilement”: This is the tathagata essence, which can be referred to also as suchness with defilement. It is said to be the substantial cause of the Three Jewels and the substantial cause of enlightenment. You must understand how to interpret this within the context here. I have explained this before. Suchness with defilement or the tathagata essence is not a fully qualified cause per se but nevertheless, there is a way of explaining why it can be called a cause. Suchness with defilement is posited as the substantial cause of enlightenment.¹

“Without defilement”: This refer to the suchness without defilement that is the fifth vajra topic, enlightenment. This enlightenment, *jangchub*, or suchness without defilement, is posited as a contributory or cooperative condition.

“The quality of undefiled Buddhahood” refers to the sixth vajra topic, qualities. This is also a contributory or cooperative condition from which the three virtuous Jewels arise.

“The Conqueror’s activities” refers to the seventh vajra topic, Buddha activities. This is another contributory or cooperative condition.

It is said that by depending on the suchness with defilement that is the substantial cause and the other cooperative conditions, one can achieve the Three Jewels.

The substantial cause and the cooperative conditions by which the Three Jewels will arise is something that can only be directly perceived, in a complete and exact way as they are, by a buddha. As such, they “are the objects just of those [directly] perceiving the ultimate.”

Verse 24

The lineage of these Three Jewels
Is an object [only] of those perceiving all,
For it is inconceivable due to four reasons
In accordance respectively with those four aspects.

Why can only a buddha directly perceive exactly and completely the fact that the Three Jewels will arise in dependence upon these substantial cause and conditions? This is because they are the objects of direct comprehension of only the buddhas. As such, they are inconceivable for non-buddhas. It is said that there are four reasons for this.

First, the objects of direct perception of a buddha are identified in Verse 23 in the context of discussing the causes and conditions for the arising of the Three Jewels:

- the suchness with defilement is the substantial cause

¹ This tathagata essence is an uncompounded phenomenon, a permanent phenomenon. As such, it cannot produce a phenomenon that undergoes momentary change. Therefore it is not a fully qualified cause, i.e., it is not a real substantial cause. Nevertheless, because the existence of this suchness with defilement is indispensable for the achievement of the final Three Jewels, it is given the name cause. (Page 7, Lesson 3).

- the three cooperative conditions²

Altogether we have identified these four objects that are stated to be the objects of direct perception of the buddhas only.

Verse 24 explains why only a buddha can directly perceive these objects.

My attempt at explaining this is done in relation to the words of the root text so you have to look at the root text as we go along. I will try to explain these verses.

Verse 25 is establishing or proving why these objects are inconceivable.

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].

“Because [the basic realm is] pure but [appears to be] afflicted”

Here, “pure” refers to the natural purity of the minds of the sentient beings in that the afflictions have never resided within the nature of the mind itself. In that sense, the mind is, by nature, “pure.”

Yet, this suchness of the mind is accompanied by defilements. So the first line is basically talking about the tathagata essence, suchness with defilement.

It is very difficult for us to conceive of these two coming together—a mind that is by nature pure, yet it is accompanied by defilements (or stains and afflictions). This is difficult to comprehend and is therefore inconceivable.

The explanation of how this is so has yet to come. At this point, we are not proving anything yet. We are just stating a thesis that we need to examine further: On the one hand, we are saying the mind is pure, but at the same time, we are also saying that it is afflicted. This is what makes it inconceivable.

“Because [enlightenment is] unafflicted but [appears] to be purified”

This is the second inconceivable point that is an explanation of undefiled enlightenment, i.e., the suchness without defilement. This suchness without defilement was never afflicted before—“because [enlightenment is] unafflicted”—yet, there comes a time when it is purified of the adventitious defilements. Again, when you put these two things together, you have another phenomenon that is quite difficult to comprehend and is inconceivable.

“[Enlightenment is] unafflicted” here refers to the suchness without defilement. Since beginningless lifetimes, it has never been in the nature of afflictions, i.e., afflictions do not abide in the nature of this suchness. It is by nature pure. Yet there

² These are (1) the reality or suchness “without defilement,” (2) “the qualities of undefiled Buddhahood” and (3) “the Conqueror’s activities.”

comes a time when it is “purified” of or separated from adventitious defilements so enlightenment can occur.

“Because [the Buddha qualities are] undifferentiated phenomena [even at the time of common being but are not manifest”

The Buddha’s qualities are undefiled, yet the suchness abiding on these undefiled qualities is not of a different nature from the suchness of sentient beings’ minds. It is difficult to comprehend how these two—the suchness of the Buddha’s qualities and the suchness of sentient beings’ minds—are undifferentiated in nature.

“And because [the Buddha activities are] spontaneous but without conceptuality”

This line refers to a buddha’s enlightened activities. It is said that when a buddha performs activities for the benefit of sentient beings, these activities engage sentient beings spontaneously, without the need for intention or motivation. They are automatic.

So these are the four things that are difficult to comprehend and are inconceivable:

1. The tathagata essence is pure by nature, yet it is accompanied by defilements.
2. The suchness without defilement, enlightenment, is unafflicted, yet there comes a time when it is purified of adventitious defilements.
3. The suchness of Buddha’s qualities and the suchness of sentient beings’ minds are by nature undifferentiated.
4. The Buddha’s enlightened activities are spontaneous, without conceptuality.

Let us look at each of these points one by one.

1. The tathagata essence is pure by nature, yet it is accompanied by defilements.

Suchness with defilement is the natural emptiness of the minds of sentient beings. It is by nature pure, yet at the same time, the minds of sentient beings are contaminated by or polluted with afflictions. It is difficult to comprehend how these two can co-exist.

If you bring these two together, you must be able to posit a cause and effect relationship between a contaminator and the contaminated (or the polluter and the polluted). How are you going to posit this cause and effect relationship for the suchness of the mind?

On the one hand, there is the natural purity of the mind, its emptiness. Yet at the same time, there is activity and this is also valid. The point here is the difficulty of understanding that the two truths have a common basis, that phenomena by their nature are empty, yet at the same time, one can posit that phenomena exist and can function.

If you think about this from the perspective of the tenets, all the tenets—with the exception of the Consequence Middle Way School—assert that if anything exists, it exists inherently. For them, because phenomena exist inherently, therefore cause and effect can work and you can posit an action, agent and object.

For these proponents of inherent existence, if a phenomenon does not exist from its own side, i.e., the phenomenon in question is only merely labelled by thought, then there is no way to explain how cause and effect can work. There is no way for them to explain coherently how there can be an action, agent and object. Therefore, with the exception of Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), every other Buddhist tenet asserts that everything that exists exists by way of their own nature, from their own side, and are inherently existent, truly existent.

They say that if things are merely labelled (or imputed by thought), then things cannot function. To them, merely labelled by thought is no different from saying that you can make up anything with your mind. As long as you label something, then that something exists. To them, this is not acceptable.

They give the example of a sprout arising from a seed. They say that there must be something from the side of the seed, something from its own side that has the ability or potential, to give rise to the sprout. Otherwise, you could produce anything from that seed other than its own sprout. Why is it that it can only produce a sprout and not anything else? So to them, this shows that there must be something right there from its own side within the cause itself. This is the assertion or the belief of every Buddhist tenet with the exception of the highest school.

Likewise, these Buddhist tenets assert that there must be something from the side of virtue that produces happiness. Why does virtue produce only happiness? Why does non-virtue produce only suffering? It cannot be because they are merely labelled by the mind. There has to be something right there from the side of the cause.

This is why the proponents of Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS) disagree with the proponents of the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS).

The proponents of the AMWS assert that:

- If phenomena are merely labelled by thought and they do not exist from their own side, then one cannot account for production and disintegration.
- If one cannot account for production and disintegration, this means that one cannot account for cause and effect.
- If that is the case, then one cannot posit the four noble truths, which become invalid.
- If the four noble truths are invalid, then the Three Jewels cannot exist.

Do you understand their argument against the CMWS? To them, if phenomena do not exist from their own side, all these other things cannot exist either.

The proponents of the CMWS also talk about the same things but they turn the argument around in this way by saying this:

- If phenomena exist from their own side, there is no way to talk about cause and effect.
- As such, there is then no way for one to talk about the four noble truths.
- As such, there is no way one can talk about Three Jewels.

The point is that most people have difficulty putting the two together—something

that is by nature empty, yet it can function. That is the most difficult thing. It is related here to how the mind's suchness with defilement is by nature pure, yet it comes complete with afflictions.

Returning to the difficulty of understanding the two truths—how the two truths can come together on any single basis in that, although by nature it is empty, yet because it is empty, therefore it can function. The coming together of these two things is very difficult to understand.

It is said that if one has the correct understanding of the emptiness of inherent existence, through the force of that realisation and correct understanding, automatically without choice, one will understand that conventionalities exist and function.

Someone may claim to be an expert on the emptiness of true existence, but if this person's understanding or realisation of emptiness does not automatically lead him to accept the presentation of conventionalities—that things can function and are valid—then he has not realised anything at all.

What we are trying to understand here is the first point that is difficult to comprehend: The tathagata essence is pure by nature, yet it is accompanied by defilements, that is, something that is by nature pure, yet there is the activity of pollution.

2. The suchness without defilement, enlightenment, is unafflicted, yet there comes a time when it is purified of adventitious defilements.

Suchness without defilement was never afflicted by defilement before because the defilements themselves, such as the afflictions of desire and so forth, can never have suchness as their object of observation. For example, desire can never focus on suchness because desire is essentially a yearning, a mind seeking or wanting something. Can desire seek out suchness? If it can, then that will make desire a virtuous mind, which is not possible. Therefore, suchness without defilement was never afflicted by defilements previously.

When one says the mind is polluted by afflictions, these afflictions can have the mind as their object of observation. When afflictions focus on the mind as their object of observation, among the retinue of the afflictions, there can arise a variety of different mental factors. Because the mind can be the object of observation of the afflictions, as such, the mind can be and is polluted by the afflictions.

If we say that defilements such as attachment and so forth cannot focus on the suchness of the mind as their object of observation, then what exactly is suchness with defilement? What is defiling this suchness?

First, you have to be clear that the suchness of our mind is accompanied with defilement. Therefore, it is called suchness with defilement, i.e., our tathagata essence.

But if somebody were to say, "Suchness with defilement actually is not defiled

because it can never be the object of observation of an affliction,” then what are you going to say?

This is not an easy point. It requires focus, attention, constant analysis and reflection. Then, maybe you will get something. It is like this: sometimes, you think you have some understanding but when you think about it more deeply, you get the feeling that you are losing that understanding. It seems to have gone away somewhere!

The mind that is polluted by the afflictions is the object, which is by nature empty. The suchness of this mind is the suchness with defilement. If you were to say that this suchness is not defiled, it would follow then that anybody should be able to directly perceive this emptiness, the suchness of the mind. All of us would be superior beings!

Why is it that we cannot directly perceive this suchness with defilement? That is because it is obscured by the defilements. Therefore, we cannot directly perceive this suchness with defilement.

Review

~ Suchness without defilement

Suchness without defilement has never been afflicted by any defilement before. Why is this so? Because defilements, such as attachment and so forth, cannot focus on this suchness, i.e., it cannot take this suchness as its object of observation.

This is the way to understand how suchness without defilement was never afflicted by defilement before.

~ Suchness with defilement

When we talk about the mind of sentient beings—the mind that is afflicted or polluted by the defilements or afflictions—this mind can be the object of observation of the afflictions. The suchness or emptiness of this mind that is polluted by the afflictions is suchness with defilement. Because it is suchness with defilement, therefore it cannot be directly perceived.

If the suchness of this mind was not accompanied by defilements, we would be able to perceive this suchness. But we cannot perceive this suchness. Why? Because it is obscured by defilements.

The mind and its suchness (or emptiness) are one entity. Therefore, it can be said that if the mind is polluted by defilements, the mind's suchness is also polluted by defilements.

Returning to the second difficult point with regard to the suchness without defilement. It was never previously afflicted by defilement because of the reasons mentioned earlier. There will come a time whereby it is purified of the adventitious defilement. The coming together of these two things is a difficult thing to comprehend. It is inconceivable.

Earlier we saw how if a mind is polluted by defilements, its suchness, which is one

entity with this mind, is also polluted by defilements. This means the mind is accompanied with defilements. But when this mind that is polluted by defilements becomes free of them, then you can also say its suchness, which is one entity with this mind, will be free of or separated from the defilements.

Whether it is suchness with defilement or suchness without defilement, it is dependent on that mind that it is one entity with.

- If the mind that it is one entity with is defiled, then the suchness of this defiled mind will be suchness with defilement.
- If the mind that it is one entity with is undefiled, then the suchness of this undefiled mind will be suchness without defilement.

You must not have the expectation that you can figure this out right away. It is something that you need to read and think about over and over again. This comes with time. If you get disheartened just because you don't understand upon hearing this for the first time, that is not very helpful, because you are not going to achieve anything.

Khen Rinpoche: You get some idea of what I'm talking about today? It is good if you get some idea. If you don't have any idea of what I am talking about, just hearing the words is also very good. But for those who did not hear anything at all, then that is not good.

SUMMARY OF VERSES 23 TO 25

Verse 23 is about the inconceivable nature of the four causes and conditions for the arising of the Three Jewels.

- The substantial cause is the suchness with defilement, i.e., the tathagata essence.
- The cooperative conditions are:
 1. the suchness without defilement
 2. the qualities of undefiled Buddhahood
 3. the Conqueror's activities

Only a buddha can directly perceive, completely and exactly, these four causes and conditions.

Verse 24 explains why this is so.

Verse 25 establishes the inconceivability of the four reasons:

1. "Because [the basic realm is] pure but [appears to be] afflicted" means that the natural purity of the minds of sentient beings is accompanied by defilement. As such, it is called the suchness with defilement. "Pure" here refers to the natural purity of the minds of the sentient beings in that the afflictions have never abided within the nature of the mind itself.
2. "Because [enlightenment is] unafflicted but [appears] to be purified": "Enlightenment" refers to the suchness without defilement. Such suchness without defilements from time without beginning has never been afflicted; yet there comes a time that it is purified of the adventitious defilements.
3. "Because [the Buddha qualities are] undifferentiated phenomena [even at the time of common being but are not manifest]": The Buddha's qualities are

undefiled, yet the suchness abiding on these undefiled qualities is not of a different nature from the suchness of the minds of sentient beings.

4. “Because [the Buddha activities are] spontaneous but without conceptuality [these four are inconceivable by common beings]”: The Buddha’s enlightened activities are spontaneous without conceptuality

The emptiness of mind is suchness. If that suchness is polluted by the afflictions, then it is suchness with defilement. Because it is suchness with defilement, therefore it cannot be directly perceived. Why? Because it is obscured by the defilements.

If the mind that it is one entity with is undefiled, then the suchness of that undefiled mind will be suchness without defilement. Suchness without defilement has never been afflicted by defilements before. Defilements, such as desire and so forth, can never have suchness as its object of observation. Therefore, suchness without defilement was never afflicted by defilements previously. Nevertheless, there will come a time when it is purified of the adventitious defilements.

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