

## **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 11**

**19 March 2015**

Explaining the verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*. Reviewing the meaning of “a visual aberration.” Explaining the meaning of “a flame of a lamp.” Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 27. Tathagata essence versus buddha lineage.

#### **EXPLAINING THE VERSE FROM THE VAJRA CUTTER SUTRA (cont'd)**

*Reviewing the meaning of “a visual aberration”*

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!

We had discussed the meaning of “a visual aberration” before.

When we look at all our mental states, the consciousnesses that we have in our continuum, we would probably say that every single instance, every single moment of these consciousnesses, is polluted by the predispositions (or imprints) of ignorance. Whatever appears to our mind and whatever we perceive, all these phenomena appear to us to be truly existent. Although they do not really exist in that way, nevertheless due to these predispositions of ignorance, anything and everything that appears to us appears to be truly existent. Just like people who, under certain medical conditions, have the vision of falling hairs, in reality, these falling hairs do not exist. It is only because of some medical condition that they have this vision of falling hairs. Likewise, although phenomena appear to us as truly existent, actually they do not truly exist. They do not exist in the way they appear to us.

In fact, with the exception of the buddhas and with the exception of the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, all consciousnesses in the continuum of sentient

beings, including the conventional valid cognisers, have this experience of the appearance of true existence with regard to whatever object appears to these consciousnesses. This is what happens without any doubt.

If you divide sentient beings into ordinary beings and the superiors, even the bodhisattva superiors, starting from bodhisattvas on the first ground all the way up to the tenth ground, have the appearance of true existence. It is said that this appearance of true existence ceases only after enlightenment is achieved.

It is said that only a buddha has abandoned all mistaken consciousnesses. That means as long as one is still a sentient being, even up to the tenth bodhisattva ground, there are still mistaken consciousnesses.

However, although both ordinary beings and the bodhisattva superiors have the appearance of true existence, there is a difference between them. Ordinary beings definitely have the appearance of true existence. But on top of that, ordinary beings assent to that appearance. They *believe* that things exist in the way they appear, i.e., they believe that things exist truly, that they exist inherently.

What about those who have realised the nature of ultimate reality, i.e., those who have realised emptiness? They also have the appearance of true existence in that whatever appears to them appears as truly existent. But because of their realisation of emptiness, they do *not* assent to that appearance. Although they still have the appearance of true existence, they no longer assent to it because they know that it is not true. Although that is how things appear to them, they do not believe it and they do not grasp at phenomena to be truly existent. So there is a difference between these superiors and ordinary beings.

Then for the person who is in meditative equipoise directly perceiving emptiness, he does not have the appearance of true existence nor is he apprehending true existence.

“A visual aberration” in this verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra* illustrates the fact that while phenomena appear to be truly existent, they do not exist in that way. Just as falling hairs do not exist, the appearance of falling hairs can exist.

While it is true that all phenomena are in the nature of emptiness and there is no phenomenon that is truly existent, yet there are phenomena that are mere appearances. They exist in the perspective of a conventional valid cogniser. Such phenomena exist and we must be able to posit their existence together with emptiness.

If you understand that, then the next analogy in the verse is the “flame of a butter lamp”.

*“A flame of a lamp”*

A flame of a butter lamp or oil lamp does not exist nor is it established from its own side as a flame. It is something that arises from the coming together of many causes and conditions. You need to have a lamp, the container in which you put the butter or oil, the wick and so forth. The flame of a butter lamp can only arise when all these

factors come together.

Here “a flame of a butter lamp” highlights the fact that such a flame can only arise from the coming together of many causes and conditions. As such, it does not exist by its own nature, from its own side. The flame of a butter lamp is a dependent arising, i.e., it arises in dependence upon the coming together of many causes and conditions.

Likewise, the samsara that we do not like does not exist under its own power nor is it established from its own side. Samsara is a product of many causes and conditions and taking a samsaric rebirth is also the result of the coming together of many causes and conditions. Primarily, samsara is the result of karma and afflictions.

Likewise, the sorrowless state that we desire does not exist from its own side under its own power. It is not going to come about automatically from its own side. Rather, it can only arise by depending on many factors.

~ *Dependent arising or dependent origination*

In his treatise, the *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, Arya Nagarjuna said that whatever is dependently arisen, that is said to be emptiness. And that which is dependently designated, that is said to be the path of the middle or the Middle Way.

There are many levels of meaning to the terms, ‘dependent arising’ or ‘dependent origination’. Some are subtler than others.

### 1. *At the level of causality*

The coarsest level of dependent arising can be seen in terms of a cause and effect relationship. By depending on their causes, effects are produced. As such, effects are dependent on their causes. This is the coarse presentation of dependent arising at the level of causality—the relationship between causes and effects. Primarily, effects are dependent on their causes. This is understood and accepted by the proponents of the Great Exposition School (GES), the Sutra School (SS) and the Mind Only School (MOS). This is dependent arising for the class of impermanent or composed phenomena.

### 2. *At the level of the whole and its parts*

Dependent arising at the level of the whole and parts is a subtler presentation. The concept is that a whole is very much dependent on its parts. You cannot talk of a whole without talking of its parts because a whole is none other than the constitution of its parts. This level of dependent arising in terms of the whole and its parts applies not only to the class of impermanent or composed phenomena as in the previous level of dependent arising. This concept of the whole and its parts pervades all phenomena, including permanent phenomena.

This level of dependent arising in terms of the whole and its parts is asserted and coherently explained by the proponents of the Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS).

### 3. *At the level of dependent designation*

Then we have the subtlest level or meaning of dependent arising—dependent arising in terms of how all phenomena are dependently designated. This assertion is made by the proponents of the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), the Prasangikas. This is the subtlest meaning of dependent arising and is also the most challenging one to understand.

Bring to mind any phenomenon—be it an external phenomenon or internal phenomenon, be it a flame of a butter lamp, even our own body, the ‘I’, the self or person. If we look for the imputed object, the flame of a butter lamp or the person, what exactly is the person? What exactly is the flame of a butter lamp? Where is it? What is it? When you do a deep analysis, you are left with nothing. You cannot find the imputed object.

We could use a flame of a butter lamp as an object of enquiry. If it is the correct finding, what you find at the end is emptiness.

Nevertheless, the object of enquiry does make a difference. It is said that this exercise is easier if we use the ‘I’ or person. We just have to think of the ‘I’ and look for it. Where is it? At the end of looking for the ‘I’, we will discover that the ‘I’ cannot be found.

When we look for the real flame of a butter lamp or the real ‘I’ that we believe in, it seems that we are not able to point to anything that is the flame of the butter lamp or the ‘I’.

But that does not mean that the flame of a butter lamp does not exist. That does not mean that the ‘I’ does not exist. It is obvious that there is a flame of a butter lamp. It is obvious that there is an ‘I’.

Let us take the example of the flame of a butter lamp. Does it not function? You cannot say that there is no flame of a butter lamp as it does function. First it has its own defining nature in that it is hot, it burns and it functions to eliminate darkness. The fact that when you look for the real flame of a butter lamp and you cannot find it, that does not mean that the flame of a butter lamp does not exist. It exists.

If the real flame of a butter lamp or the real ‘I’ exists, then when you look for it, you should be able to find it. If something is real, if it exists in the way it appears to you, then the more you look for it, the more you should be able to see it. It should be more obvious and you should be able to find it. If there is something that you can really point to—“That is the flame of a butter lamp!” or “That is the ‘I’!”—then it must be found.

But you do not find it. What does that mean? It means that the flame of a butter lamp or the ‘I’ does not exist from its own side. It means that they do not exist from the side of their basis of designation and under their own power. Whether it is the aggregates or the ‘I’, its perceived nature of being real, autonomously existent or existing from its own side, does not exist. It does not have that nature at all. Its nature is such that it transcends being something that can exist from its own side. That fact—that it is something that can exist from its own side—can never be discovered

because its nature is such that it has never existed from its own side. If it exists in the way it appears, then when we look for it, we should be able to find it.

There are different lines of reasoning for doing such an investigation. If we apply those lines of reasoning, we will not be able to find the real flame of a lamp or the real 'I'. This means that their existence or establishment from their own side cannot stand up to such an analysis.

In the texts that deal with the Middle Way, there is a phrase, “unable to withstand analysis” or “unable to bear analysis through reasoning.” If something exists in the way it appears, it should exist from its own side so that when you look for it, you should find it. If you cannot find it, it shows that inherent existence or existence from its own side is something that cannot withstand analysis or cannot bear analysis through reasoning because it cannot be found.

But if you talk about just the 'I' itself, not the real 'I' but just the 'I' that exists, the flame of a butter lamp that exists or the aggregates that exist, do they exist or not? They exist because reasoning cannot harm their existence. If you apply reason and you cannot harm the existence of your body, then your body does exist. The very fact that your body exists does not go against reasoning.

Going back to looking for the imputed object. Where is this real 'I'? If the flame of a butter lamp, your body or the 'I' exists in the way they appear, that is, appearing to exist inherently from their own side, then they have to be found. But they cannot be found. They cannot withstand analysis.

Instead, what you find or discover is the non-existence of true existence. You would not discover the non-existence of the 'I'. Rather you discover the non-existence of a truly existent 'I'. At the end of your analysis, you are not discovering that there is no 'I'. You are not discovering that there is no flame of a butter lamp.

Everything in samsara and nirvana—the 'I', the body, the mind and so forth—does not exist from its own side. Nevertheless, everything exists. How do we know it exists? Because we experience its existence through the benefit or harm we receive when we come into contact with these objects. Obviously, they exist. We experience the enjoyment of these objects.

But if you dig deeper and look at their nature, looking for the real thing—the real 'I', the real nirvana, the real samsara—what you find is that you cannot find the real imputed object. Yet, the imputed object exists.

In the end, there is no alternative to explaining existence other than that everything that exists, exists as mere appearances to a conventional valid cogniser. Anything and everything that exists, exists as something posited by a conventional valid cogniser. There is no other option left than this.

Any existent you can point to either exists from its own side, under its own power or not. If it is the former, you should be able to point to something that is the object if it exists from its own side. The other option is that it does not exist from its own side.

There is no other option.

If an existent really exists from its own side, right there from the basis of designation, something that you can point to, then when you look for it, it must be found. If it really exists, it must be found.

But when you look for it, you do not find the real 'I', the real body and so forth. Yet we know that there is an 'I'. There is a body because we experience it. So the conclusion is that the only viable alternative is that phenomena are just mere appearances posited by a conventional valid cogniser. This is how they exist.

According to the Prasangikas, the proponents of the CMWS, at the end of the day, what the person is, what the 'I' is, is merely imputed in dependence upon the five aggregates, the bases of designation. Which means to say that the 'I' is not the body, not the mind nor any of the five aggregates. Neither is the 'I' all the five aggregates. Yet the 'I' exists. So the 'I' exists as that which is merely imputed in dependence on the aggregates. Its existence is no more and no less than that which is just merely designated, merely imputed by thought, in dependence upon the aggregates.

Having said this, when we look at the aggregates, suddenly deep down, we think that the five aggregates are indeed the bases of designation of the 'I' and that they are the real bases of designation from their own side. The five aggregates have always existed from their own side as the bases of designation for the 'I' from its own side waiting to be designated.

You know the kind of feeling I am talking about? It is that kind of feeling. But even that is wrong. Just as the 'I' is merely imputed, the five aggregates that are the bases of designation for the 'I' are also merely imputed by thought. They do not exist from their own side as the bases of designation for the 'I'.

When we say that something is established as merely labelled by the mind or exists in mere name or mere convention, these terms all mean the same thing. The mind is merely labelled. It exists in mere name. The basis of designation, the body, also exists in mere name.

But when we think about establishment in mere name, again, we think that there is a real name there. It exists in mere name, but again we cling to a real name. But even that is empty of existing from its own side.

When we say that something is established in mere name or mere convention, this means that, conventionally speaking, everybody in the world agrees with the term we use. That is about it. All things exist in mere name. And if we look for the mere name, even the mere name does not exist from its own side. It is just a mere name by convention, famed and known in the world as such. That is about it. It does not exist from its own side.

What about the mind that imputes or designates the name? Even the thought that designates the name does not exist from its own side.

We may think, “Finally, there must be something there imputing all these mere names.” Where then is this real consciousness? Even that cannot be found because if we were to look for the thought in our own mind that is imputing—or even the thought in someone else’s mind—when we look for that imputing thought, where is it?

If we were to look for it in detail, we cannot find it. Is it the present thought, the past thought or a thought that is going to happen in the future? Again, what we find in the end is that even the thought is merely imputed.

As such, according to the CMWS, everything is in the nature of emptiness because they are dependently designated (or dependently originated, dependently arisen). In particular, everything that exists is merely imputed by thought. As such, they are dependently designated. If something is dependently designated, then it cannot exist from its own side. It cannot exist inherently. Therefore, the meaning of emptiness is dependent arising, or rather specifically, being dependently designated.

In the teachings, this line of reasoning is given to help one understand emptiness:

The subject, the person, is not truly existent because it is a dependent arising.

The subject, the person, is not truly existent: this is the thesis to be proven. The reason is: because it is a dependent arising.

What this is saying is that if you want to understand emptiness, first you have to understand the meaning of dependent arising. There are many levels in terms of subtlety with regard to dependent arising. It is said that one has to think a lot about dependent arising, and then slowly, the meaning of emptiness will become apparent. We have to discover for ourselves and think deeply about the meaning of dependent arising:

- starting with dependent arising at the coarse level, i.e., dependent arising in terms of causality
- dependent arising in terms of the whole and its parts
- finally, dependent arising in terms of how all phenomena are dependently designated

Gradually one comes to a subtler understanding of the meaning of dependent arising. It is said that when one has the correct understanding of dependent arising—the real understanding of dependent arising in terms of how phenomena are dependently designated—then one will be able to destroy the very focus of the apprehension of true existence, the very thing that ignorance is clinging on to. Destroying this very thing that ignorance is clinging on to can induce the experience of what emptiness is.

Through the correct understanding of dependent arising in terms of phenomena being dependent designated, you are able to discover from your own experience exactly what ignorance is. Ignorance is clinging on to and focusing on something, holding on to it very tightly. We call that the object of negation, that is, true existence, inherent existence or existence from its own side.

When you recognise well what ignorance is clinging on to through your understanding of dependent arising, when you are able to see how inherent existence does not exist, then you will arrive at an understanding of emptiness. You are hitting the point! Only then can you claim to have some understanding and ascertainment of emptiness.

It is said in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*,

One who sees the cause and effect of all phenomena  
Of both cyclic existence and the state beyond sorrow as forever  
unbetraying,  
And for whom any object trusted in by the grasping mind has  
completely disappeared,  
Has at that time entered the path pleasing the Buddhas.

So the “one who sees the cause and effect of all phenomena” as infallible is the person who has the correct understanding of dependent arising, and for whom the object that his apprehension of true existence or ignorance is holding on to so tightly has disappeared—that object no longer exists in his experience. This is the person who has entered the path and who makes the buddhas happy.

The person sees that dependent arising is infallible, that existents do function. Yet, at the same time, in his experience, he no longer trusts the very thing that ignorance is clinging on to. He sees that true existence does not exist whatsoever. This is the person who is said to have entered the path pleasing the buddhas. Why are the buddhas happy with this person? Because this person has finally started to shake the whole of samsara.

The whole problem is samsara and its suffering, and the root of all our problems is ignorance, the apprehension of true existence. Someone who really has the correct understanding of dependent arising, especially at its subtlest level of how all phenomena are dependently designated, comes to see emptiness. Then for such a person, the meaning of dependent arising is emptiness and the meaning of emptiness is dependent arising. For this person, dependent arising and emptiness are not contradictory but complementary, i.e., one complements the other.

It is said that for the person who has a good and correct understanding of the view of the Middle Way (or subtle dependent arising), when he reflects on dependent arising in terms of causality—how effects are dependent on causes and causes bring about effects—that very understanding of dependent arising induces a powerful understanding of the empty nature of phenomena and induces the understanding of emptiness also.

For the person who has the correct understanding of emptiness, that understanding comes about through the correct understanding of subtle dependent arising. Since the meaning of emptiness is discovered in dependence on the understanding of subtle dependent arising, the correct understanding and experience of emptiness possessed by this person will assist his understanding of dependent arising too. This is because that very realisation of emptiness has come about in dependence upon his



correct understanding of dependent arising. In this sense, his understanding of emptiness complements and helps his understanding of dependent arising. So they do not harm one another.

But this is not to say that therefore the mind that realises there is no true existence, that there is no inherent existence, realises dependent arising.

Yes, one has to understand dependent arising, especially subtle dependent arising correctly, and through the force of that, one comes to realise emptiness. The force of realising emptiness also induces the understanding of dependent arising. But that is not to say that the mind that realises the emptiness of true existence realises dependent arising.

This is complicated and there are many things you need to know, that you need to sort out before this makes sense. One of these things is that emptiness is a non-affirming negative.

When we say the words, ‘emptiness of true existence’, what those words are getting at is simply the negation of true existence or inherent existence. These words do not suggest that there is something else that has to be understood. The ‘emptiness of true existence’ is a simple statement of negation—that there is no true existence—nothing more than that.

Because the emptiness of inherent existence is a non-affirming negative, as such, the mind realising emptiness realises only that and that alone. Specifically, the mind realising emptiness does not realise dependent arising. But through the force of that realisation of emptiness, it can once again induce a strong understanding of dependent arising.

The next verse in the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* states,

If the appearance of dependent relation,  
Which is unbetraying, is accepted separately from emptiness,  
And as long as they are seen as separate,  
Then one has still not realized the Buddha’s intent.

A person who has found the correct view of the Middle Way is someone:

- whose understanding of emptiness assists his understanding of dependent arising
- whose understanding of dependent arising assists his understanding of emptiness

As long as these two appear contradictory, separate or unrelated, this person has still not realised the intent of the Buddha. In other words, a person who sees emptiness and dependent arising as contradictory and not complementary is someone who has not fully understood correctly or well the meaning of emptiness.

The next verse states,

If [these two realizations] are happening simultaneously without  
alternation,  
And from merely seeing dependent relation as completely  
unbetraying/infallible  
The definite ascertainment comes that completely destroys  
The way all objects are apprehended [as truly existent],  
At that time the analysis of the ultimate view is complete.

Prayers such as the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* are recited by many people, in which you will find this discussion of emptiness.

Even in the root text of this module, the *Tathagata Essence*, you will find statement like, “Because the nature of the mind is emptiness, therefore it is in the nature of clear light.” There are many statements like this. This means that before you can understand the *Tathagata Essence*, you must have some idea of what emptiness of inherent existence means and how something that is by nature empty can exist. Therefore, gaining some idea of the emptiness of inherent existence becomes very important.

The final mode of abiding or the ultimate nature of our mind is unchanging. It has always been like that. That is a fact. Yet we have to say that it is a dependent arising. Its existence must depend on something; yet its ultimate nature—the suchness or emptiness of the mind—has never changed and will never change.

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*Question:* Is there a common locus between the mental image of a person and the person since according to the Prasangikas, the person is mere appearance?

*Answer:* There is no common locus because the mental image of a person is not the person. The person that is mere appearance is a fully qualified person who exists.

*Question:* Why is the tathagata essence necessarily an emptiness?

*Answer:* Although the buddha lineage is discussed primarily in terms of the tathagata essence, the buddha lineage is not necessarily the tathagata essence. This will become evident later on when we look at Verse 27 that seems to indicate that.

Verse 27

Because a perfect Buddha’s body is pervasive,  
Because suchness is without differentiation,  
And because a [Buddha] lineage exists, all embodied  
Are always in possession of a Buddha essence.

There are different ways of explaining the tathagata essence. In Verse 27, three reasons are put forth that attempts to establish or prove that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings. This will become clearer later on.

When we talk about the buddha lineage that is suitable to transform into the body of

a buddha, there are the naturally abiding lineage and the developmental lineage. The reason for this is because when we talk about a buddha's bodies, there are both the compounded and un-compounded. As such, there must be something that is suitable to be transformed into the compounded body of a buddha, and likewise, there must be something that is suitable to be transformed into the un-compounded buddha's body. Therefore, we have the naturally abiding lineage and developmental lineage.

*Question:* Could you please clarify what the ultimate Buddha Jewel is? What is the pervasion of the ultimate Buddha Jewel versus the final Buddha Jewel? In Lesson 2, we talked about the ultimate Buddha Jewel in the sense of the abandonment of the afflictive obscurations. Should this not cover the knowledge obscurations as well?

*Answer:* In general, the Buddha is necessarily free from the two obscurations and not just free from the afflictive obscurations. Definitely, the Buddha has to be someone who is free of the two obscurations. That is definitely the case.

If you were to compare the ultimate Buddha Jewel and the final Buddha Jewel, which has a broader limit of pervasion? It is the final Buddha Jewel as it covers more things. The ultimate Buddha Jewel has a smaller limit of pervasion. So they are not the same thing. They do not mean the same thing.

While the ultimate Buddha Jewel and the final Buddha Jewel are not the same, the final Buddha Jewel and the final or ultimate refuge—or the final or ultimate object of refuge—are mutually inclusive. This is as opposed to temporary refuge. So you have to be clear with regard to all these terms.

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