

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 Gyaltsab Je's Commentary to the First Chapter, translated by Gavin Kilty (*The Tathagata Essence, Commentary to the First Chapter* by Gyaltsap Darma Rinchen © FPMT, Inc. January 2007).

Lesson 12

26 March 2015

Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 25—31. Reviewing Verse 25: The four difficult points. Verse 26: Cause & conditions. Verse 27 & 28: Proof that we possess the tathagata essence. Verse 29: The clear light nature of the mind: the ten aspects. Verse 30: the entity and the causes. Verse 31. Extensive presentation of the entity.

Question: The subtle motivational effort is one of the main obstacles to the attainment of spontaneous effort. As far as I know, it is a knowledge obscuration, and necessarily, an obstruction to omniscience. Is it classified under the big, middling or small obstruction? When it is pacified, does it mean that the bodhisattva superior will proceed directly on to the path of no-more-learning and that the four bodies of a buddha will be actualised immediately?

Answer: The subtle motivational effort arises in dependence on the force of the knowledge obscurations. But to say that the subtle motivational effort is a knowledge obscuration, that has to be discussed further. There are three knowledge obscurations in terms of their level of subtlety. Perhaps you can say that then there are three levels of the subtle motivational effort. Once you have abandoned even the smallest of the knowledge obscurations, then the four bodies are actualised.

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### **REVIEWING VERSE 25: THE FOUR DIFFICULT POINTS**

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].

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

The first difficult point is related to the tathagata essence or suchness with defilement. The tathagata essence is naturally pure of stains; yet it is said to be accompanied by defilements. This comes across as a contradiction.

When we say that the tathagata essence (or basic constituent) is naturally pure, what this means is that right from the very moment it existed, it has always existed as something that has never ever been truly existent. It is by nature *not* truly existent. As such, the tathagata essence is naturally pure.

But if the tathagata essence is naturally pure, why then do we also refer to it as suchness with defilement? Why is it accompanied by defilements?

The way to understand this is that the basis of the suchness here is the mind. We are talking about the mind’s suchness. Because the mind is polluted by defilements or stains, the mind’s suchness that is one entity with it is likewise accompanied by defilements. This is the reason why we say that the tathagata essence is suchness with defilement or accompanied by defilements.

What is the proof? Why is this an accurate reason? Because the mind is accompanied with defilements, the mind’s suchness that is one entity with the mind is also said to be accompanied with defilements. **You have to say that because if you say the suchness of the mind is naturally pure, and therefore, it cannot be accompanied by defilements, why is it that we do not see the suchness of the mind?** The reason why we do not directly see the suchness of the mind is because something is obscuring us from doing so. Therefore, it is accompanied with defilements.

To recap, the way to understand the first difficult point—that the tathagata essence is pure but it appears to be afflicted—is this: That suchness is naturally pure and it has never existed inherently, i.e., it did not come into existence with the nature of inherent existence. As such, the suchness is by nature pure. However, it is a suchness that is accompanied by defilements but the defilements are adventitious. So when we say suchness with defilement here, it is a suchness with adventitious defilements.

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

Enlightenment is by nature unafflicted. What is enlightenment? Enlightenment comes about through the purification of defilements. On the one hand, we say that enlightenment is by nature pure; yet enlightenment **or** suchness without defilement is purified.

Enlightenment is suchness without defilement. Enlightenment here is the dharmakaya, the truth body. Within the truth body, there is:

- a nature body that is a natural purity
- a nature body that is an adventitious purity

Let us consider the nature body that is a natural purity. This nature body (or the svabhavakaya) is by nature pure and empty of inherent existence. The afflictions have never abided in the nature of this suchness. So it has always been unafflicted, yet we say that later on it is purified of adventitious defilements. It is difficult to comprehend these two points as they seem to contradict one another.

The example given in the text is gold. There are instances when refined gold is tarnished. Gold by nature is gold. Whatever is tarnishing the gold is not in the nature of the gold itself. One can polish the refined gold, and at the end of that process, when the substance that is tarnishing the gold is removed, what remains is the refined gold. Gold by nature has always been gold from the beginning. One can relate this example to the mind. The mind is pure by nature; yet there can come a time when it is purified of stains.

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

The third difficult point to comprehend is related to the Buddha qualities—that the suchness of the Buddha qualities is of an undifferentiable nature from the suchness of a sentient being’s mind.

There is no contradiction here because during one’s time as a sentient being, one is not yet a buddha. Therefore, one does not possess Buddha qualities. One becomes a buddha when the adventitious defilements are purified. When the defilements are purified, that very suchness that is purified is a quality which exists naturally right there.

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

The fourth difficult point relates to the fact that the Buddha activities are spontaneous, yet they arise without any conceptuality. It is said that the Buddha activities engage fully with sentient beings in accordance with their mentality and their level of merit. Such engagement is spontaneous, effortless and arises without any preceding thought that thinks, “I am going to do this.” So this is a difficult point to understand.

## CAUSE AND CONDITIONS

Verse 26 is a presentation of the causes and conditions.

### Verses 26

[The basic constituent that is] the object to be realized, [the enlightenment that] realizes it.

[The Buddha qualities that are] branches of this, and [the Buddha activities that are] for the sake of causing realization—

Of these, respectively the first topic [the basic constituent] is the cause

Of purification; the [other] three are conditions [of purification].

“[The basic constituent that is] the object to be realized, [the enlightenment that]

realizes it./ [The Buddha qualities that are] branches of this, and [the Buddha activities that are] for the sake of causing realization—”: The object to be realised here is the basic constituent or tathagata essence. This is the suchness with defilement. When it is directly realised, then one achieves the state of enlightenment. Otherwise, one continues to remain in cyclic existence.

The main cause for actualising the dharmakaya is the wisdom directly realising emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior. The dharmakaya we are referring to here is specifically the wisdom truth body (or jnanakaya).

While the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior is the main cause for actualising the wisdom truth body, having said that, if this wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior does not have a proper focus, such a wisdom cannot be developed. The main focus of that wisdom is the suchness with defilement. As such, the suchness with defilement is considered the ‘cause’ of enlightenment.

“Of these, respectively the first topic [the basic constituent] is the cause/ Of purification”: The point is that you have to know why the tathagata essence or suchness with defilement is labelled as a cause of enlightenment. The finality of this wisdom directly perceiving emptiness in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior is enlightenment.

“[The Buddha qualities that are] branches of this”: The branches here refer to the Buddha qualities, for it is the qualities of a buddha that primarily work to fulfill the welfare of sentient beings.

“And [the Buddha activities that are] for the sake of causing realization”: In dependence on the Buddha qualities, one is able to work for the welfare of sentient beings. Because of these qualities, Buddha activities come about to engage sentient beings. These activities cause sentient beings to comprehend and to realise what the buddhas themselves have realised.

The meaning of this verse is similar to what has been discussed earlier, i.e., that the tathagata essence or the basic constituent is the cause of enlightenment. Enlightenment itself, the Buddha qualities and Buddha activities are the conditions for the achievement of enlightenment.

## **PROOF THAT WE POSSESS THE TATHAGATA ESSENCE**

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.

Verse 28

Because the exalted Buddha-wisdom dwells in the multitudes of

sentient beings  
 And because the undefiled nature is non-dual  
 And the Buddha lineage is designated [a Buddha, this being the name  
 of] its effect,  
 It is said that all transmigrators have the Buddha-essence.

Here we are trying to prove that all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence. In Verse 27, three reasons are posited to establish or prove that this is the case and the explanations are given from the perspective of:

- the result
- the nature
- the cause

*From the perspective of the result*

“Because a perfect Buddha’s body is pervasive”: This is an explanation of how all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence from the perspective of the result.

The first reason that is posited here to prove that sentient beings have the tathagata essence is that the enlightened deeds of the Buddha, the enlightened deeds of the dharmakaya, emanate out to and pervade all sentient beings. If they can emanate out to and pervade all sentient beings, then there must be something that is being pervaded. What this means is that sentient beings are suitable receptacles for receiving the enlightened activities of the Buddha, i.e., we are suitable to be engaged by the enlightened activities of a buddha.

Here the result refers to the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya that are said to be emanating out to and pervading all sentient beings at all times. If it is pervasive, there must be something that is being pervaded. Because it is emanating, someone must be receiving the emanation of these enlightened activities. Who is being affected by these enlightened activities? It is the sentient beings who have the suchness with defilement. The point is that there is something in us that makes us suitable to receive the enlightened deeds of the dharmakaya.

*Khen Rinpoche: I think that is the logic. That’s it.*

*From the perspective of the nature*

“Because suchness is without differentiation”: The suchness without defilement (i.e., separated from defilements) and the suchness with defilement have the same nature.

The second reason for proving that we all have the tathagata essence is because the nature of our tathagata essence (the suchness with defilement) is no different from the nature of a buddha’s mind (the suchness without defilement). Because the suchness of a buddha’s mind and the suchness of a sentient being’s mind are the same in nature, as such, all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence.

Because the suchness of sentient being’s minds is accompanied with defilement, so during that time, that suchness with defilement is called the tathagata essence. The suchness with defilement that is possessed by all sentient beings, which is of the

same nature as the suchness without defilements, is called the tathagata essence.

*From the perspective of the cause*

“And because a [Buddha] lineage exists”: The third reason proving that all sentient beings have the tathagata essence is this:

- All sentient beings possess within them the potential that is suitable to be transformed into the dharmakaya. This is called the naturally abiding lineage.
- All sentient beings also possess within them the potential that is suitable to be transformed into the form bodies of a buddha. This is called the developmental lineage.

Because all sentient beings possess within them these phenomena that are suitable to be transformed into the dharmakaya and the rupakaya, therefore all sentient beings are said to possess the tathagata essence.

Verses 27 and 28 seek to establish that all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence.

|                                                           |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> reason from the perspective of the result | “Because a perfect Buddha’s body is pervasive.” | Because sentient beings are pervaded by the enlightened activities of a buddha                                                                                                       |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> reason from the perspective of the nature | “Because suchness is without differentiation.”  | Because the suchness of sentient beings’ minds is no different from the suchness of a buddha’s mind                                                                                  |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> reason from the perspective of the cause  | “And because a [Buddha] lineage exists.”        | Because in the mental continua of sentient beings, there are lineages that are suitable to be transformed into the dharmakaya (truth body) and the rupakaya (form body) of a buddha. |

In the *Tathagata Essence* sutra, nine analogies are given to help explain how the defilements are adventitious. Another sutra offers a presentation of the ten aspects that establish the clear light nature of the mind.

But before we move on, you should understand the main points of Verses 27 and 28. Here three reasons are presented that seek to establish the fact that all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence.

- The first reason is an explanation from the perspective of the result. Since we sentient beings are suitable recipients of a buddha’s enlightened activities of the dharmakaya, as such, we are said to possess the tathagata essence.
- The second reason is an explanation from the perspective of the nature. Because the nature of the suchness of our mind is no different from the suchness of the mind of a buddha, as such, it is said that we possess the tathagata essence.
- The third reason is an explanation from the perspective of the cause. We possess the Buddha lineage in us; therefore, we possess the tathagata essence.

### **CLEAR LIGHT NATURE OF THE MIND: THE TEN ASPECTS**

Next is the presentation of the ten aspects that explain the clear light nature of the

mind. Verse 29 identifies what these ten aspects are.

#### Verse 29

The entity [of natural purity], the causes [that serve as means of purification], the effect [of separation from all defilements], the function [of causing adoption and discarding upon seeing the disadvantages of pain and advantages of pleasure], the possession [of the qualities of cause and effect], manifestation [of differences in reality by way of the persons on whom it depends],

States [of difference], and similarly the meaning of omnipresence [that is, reality pervading all],

Immutability at all times [in terms of good qualities], and undifferentiability [of the final] qualities

Are said to be the intended meaning of the ultimate basic element.

The ten aspects are:

1. the entity
2. the causes
3. the effect
4. the function
5. the possession
6. manifestation
7. states
8. the meaning of omnipresence
9. immutability at all times
10. undifferentiability [of the final] qualities

#### *1 & 2. The entity and the causes*

Verse 30 talks about the first two aspects, the entity and the causes.

#### Verse 30 (a,b)

Like the [natural] purity of a jewel, space, and water,  
The nature [of the basic constituent] is always unafflicted.

This is the aspect of the entity or nature.

“Like the [natural] purity of a jewel, space, and water”: Here in Verse 30, there are these three things: jewel, space and water.

#### *~ Jewel*

Earlier on, we had seen through the perspective of the result, the perspective of nature and through the perspective of the cause, how all sentient beings are said to possess the tathagata essence. Of the three, the first explanation from the perspective of the result shows how the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya emanate to and pervade all sentient beings. “Jewel” here is analogous of the dharmakaya (or truth body).

~ *Space*

The second reason that was posited for all sentient beings possessing the tathagata essence is the undifferentiable nature of the suchness of the minds of sentient beings mind and the suchness of a buddha's mind. This is explained through the analogy of space.

~ *Water*

The fact that we have the tathagata essence is because we possess the buddha lineage. This is explained through the analogy of water.

These analogies are supposed to help us understand the first aspect, entity. The point of understanding them is to arrive at the understanding that the nature of mind is clear light.

## Verse 30 (c,d)

It arises from (1) devotion to the [Great Vehicle] doctrine, (2) the higher wisdom [realizing selflessness], (3) [The immeasurable] meditative stabilization [endowed with bliss], and (4) compassion [for sentient beings].

This is the aspect of the causes, of which there are four:

“(1) Devotion to the [Great Vehicle] doctrine”: The doctrine here is the Mahayana doctrine.

“(2) The higher wisdom [realizing selflessness]”

“(3) [The immeasurable] meditative stabilization [endowed with bliss]”: Here it is the meditative stabilisation **of the space treasure**. I guess you can posit this meditative stabilisation to be the meditative stabilisation of a bodhisattva.

“(4) Compassion [for sentient beings]” refers to great compassion.

One needs a stable devotion to the presentation of causality as explained in the Mahayana. Based on that, one generates great compassion and the mind of enlightenment. After which one meditates on and develops calm abiding and special insight.

This is just a brief presentation of the entity and the causes. The elaborate explanations will come later.

There must be something that serves as the means of purification of the mind. That does not happen without applying the antidotes. Therefore, the four causes are discussed here.

Although the mind is pure by nature, it is accompanied with the defilements. Similarly, suchness is naturally pure but it is accompanied with defilement, so it is suchness with defilement. However, the defilements are adventitious. Although it is naturally pure, it is accompanied by these adventitious defilements. If we do not remove these adventitious defilements, we will not actualise the dharmakaya.

So what do we need to do to get rid of these adventitious defilements? These are the



four causes given here.

~ *More on the entity*

Verse 31 is a slightly more extensive explanation of the first aspect, the entity.

Verse 31

Because of [having] the power [of fulfilling hopes], of not changing  
to anything other [in nature],  
And of being a nature whose entity is moist [with compassion],  
[The basic constituent] is qualitatively similar to the features  
Of a precious [wish-granting] jewel, space, and water.

“Because of [having] the power [of fulfilling hopes]”: The dharmakaya is said to possess the power to fulfill the wishes and welfare of all the sentient beings. Likewise, from the side of sentient beings, they also have the power and ability to be touched by or receive the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya.

“Of not changing to anything other [in nature]”: The nature of suchness will never change into something of a different nature. Just as un compounded space is nothing more than the mere absence of obstructiveness, suchness is nothing more than the mere negation of true existence. This mere negation of true existence is suchness, nothing more and nothing less. Whether it is the suchness with defilement or suchness without defilement, the nature of suchness is the mere negation of true existence.

“And of being a nature whose entity is moist [with compassion]”: Just as it is the nature of water to be moist, in the same way, all sentient beings by nature have within them the potential to become enlightened. There are something within every sentient being that is suitable to be transformed into the dharmakaya and the rupakaya. It is also said that just as water is moist, all sentient beings by nature are compassionate.

If you think about this, logically speaking, you have to say that there has never been a time when we have not developed compassion towards every sentient being. There isn't a sentient being in existence that has not been an object of our compassion. If you think along the lines of the seven-fold cause and effect instructions where it says there isn't a sentient being who has not been our mother or our loved one, the reasoning here is similar to that.

The reason why our compassion does not manifest towards all sentient beings is because whatever compassion we have is obstructed and destroyed by our anger. Also it is because we do not cultivate the mind of compassion by bringing together all the causes and conditions for it to arise. If we can bring those causes and conditions together and generate compassion for one sentient being, there is no reason why we cannot extend that compassion to every sentient being.

First, logically speaking, there isn't a sentient being whom we have never felt any compassion for. This means that we have felt compassion for every sentient being

sometime in the past. If the causes for this compassion to diminish are not present, there is nothing to stop this compassion from manifesting. Then one would have to say that one can develop compassion for all sentient beings. Since there isn't a sentient being for whom we have never felt compassion, that means we all have the capacity to feel compassion. That means by nature we are compassionate. If we can feel compassion for one sentient being, logically by extension, we can feel compassion for all sentient beings.

So because of having the power to fulfill hopes, of not changing in its nature and being a nature that is moist with compassion, the basic constituent is qualitatively similar to the features of the analogies used earlier—the jewel, space and water.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SUNDAY, 29 MARCH 2015

1. Among the seven vajra topics, the first three are objects of attainment. How does the remaining four vajra topics act as causes and conditions for achieving these objects of attainment?
2. The Buddha Jewel possesses eight qualities. How are the first three qualities related to the fulfilment of one's own purpose and the next three qualities related to the fulfilment of the purpose of others?
3. With reference to Verse 9, how is "Obeisance to the sun of excellent doctrine, not non-existent, / Not existent, not existent and non-existent, and not analyzable as other/ than existent and non-existent, devoid of description, / Known by oneself individually, quiescent" an explanation of true cessations and how is the remainder of this verse an explanation of true paths?

Verse 9

Obeisance to the sun of excellent doctrine, not non-existent,  
Not existent, not existent and non-existent, and not analyzable as  
other than existent and non-existent, devoid of description,  
Known by oneself individually, quiescent, undefiled, illumined with  
the light rays of exalted wisdom,  
And thoroughly destroying desire, hatred, and obscuration with  
respect to all objects of observation.

4. With reference to Verse 13 and the first six qualities of the Sangha Jewel, identify the words in this verse that relate to each of the qualities.

Verse 13

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

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