# 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).

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Explaining the verse from the Vajra Cutter Sutra (cont'd): "An illusion." Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus.* Verses 30—33. Clear light nature of the mind: The ten aspects (cont'd) Reviewing Verse 30 a,b—31: The entity. Verse 32 & 33: Extensive presentation of the causes.

## EXPLAINING THE VERSE FROM THE VAJRA CUTTER SUTRA (CONT'D)

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!

#### "An illusion"

Through the act of magic, an illusionist can cause an object to appear in a variety of ways. When he conjures up an illusion, he transforms the object into something beautiful and attractive. People who see that illusion is then attracted to and develop an attachment to it. Likewise, if the illusionist transforms the object into something frightening or unpleasant, those who see that illusion may develop an aversion or even fear towards the object.

Although in reality, it is just an illusion—there is nothing there from the side of the object that has been made to look beautiful or unpleasant and that is able to give happiness or cause harm to the viewer—nevertheless, when the illusion is conjured up, it is able to induce these reactions of either attachment or aversion from the viewers.

It is also like that with regard to the suffering of cyclic existence. From our side, there is an apprehension clinging on to this suffering as if it existed or was established

right there from its own side. This induces in us aversion towards and dislike for such suffering. In certain situations, it may induce attachment. Although the suffering does not exist in and of itself from its own side, yet it appears to us as if it existed in that way. This is the basis upon which we develop attachment or aversion, which in turn brings us pain and suffering.

The analogy of "an illusion" is used here to illustrate this fact. When an illusionist conjures up an illusion, transforming an object into something it is not, when viewers see that illusion, although it is just an illusion, they are induced into reacting with either attachment or aversion. Likewise, the suffering of cyclic existence has never existed right there from its own side. It has never existed in and of itself but it appears to us to exist that way. Furthermore, we assent to that appearance and believe in it, which in turn induces us to react with either aversion or attachment.

It is similar to what is stated in the following verse:

All the phenomena of samsara and nirvana are mere fabrications of the mind.

However, we are mistaken in holding on to them as real, as truly existent.

As such, do not cling but look at them as empty.

This verse is saying that the reality of all phenomena, everything that exists, is a mere fabrication of the mind or is merely imputed by the mind. They do not exist in and of themselves. Although that is the reality, they appear to us to exist right there from their own side. That appearance is the work of the mistaken mind due to its apprehension of true existence. It is a creation, a projection of ignorance. As such, do not believe in that projection and do not follow after it, because you do not want suffering. If you do not want suffering, then do not follow that false projection. Instead, look at everything that exists as empty.

This is what we can think about when we come across this analogy of "an illusion" in this verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*, taking as our basis our own experience of the various sufferings in cyclic existence.

I have a question for you: If one really sees everything to be in the nature of emptiness, does that mean that henceforth one will never have any fear and never be afraid again? Does it mean that you will never cling on to things again?

#### CLEAR LIGHT NATURE OF THE MIND: THE TEN ASPECTS (CONT'D)

We have started looking at the clear light nature of the mind, which is explained by the presentation of the ten aspects. Among the ten, the first relates to the entity of the clear light nature of the mind. This presentation was preceded by Verse 28 that states three reasons as proof of the existence of the tathagata essence in all sentient beings.

1. The entity: Reviewing Verses 30 & 31

Verse 30 a, b

Like the [natural] purity of a jewel, space, and water,

The nature [of the basic constituent] is always unafflicted.

In explaining the entity of the tathagata essence (or the buddha lineage),

- The dharmakaya, the truth body of a buddha, is likened to a wish-fulfilling jewel.
- Suchness is likened to space.
- The tathagata essence itself is likened to pure water.

A more extensive explanation of the entity of the tathagata essence can be found in Verse 31.

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.

It was mentioned earlier in Verse 27 that "a perfect Buddha's body is pervasive." This means that the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya have the quality of being able to fulfil and actualise all worldly and transcendental qualities. This dharmakaya has the power to fulfil the hopes of sentient beings. Sentient beings from their side have the ability to receive the beneficial effects of the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya. That is because the dharmakaya has the power of fulfilling the hopes of sentient beings.

"Of not changing to anything other [in nature]" refers to the reality of suchness. Suchness here is likened to space whose nature is nothing more than the mere absence of obstructiveness. Likewise, the nature of suchness is the absence of inherent existence.

Verse 27 states that "Suchness is without differentiation." This means that the nature of the suchness of sentient beings' minds and the nature of suchness of a buddha's mind are the same; there is no difference in their nature. As such, it is said that sentient beings possess the tathagata essence.

"And of being a nature whose entity is moist [with compassion]" is related to the third line of Verse 27 that states, "And because a [Buddha] lineage exists" and therefore, it is said that all sentient beings possess the buddha lineage.

- There is a phenomenon that is suitable to be transformed into the dharmakaya called the naturally abiding lineage.
- There is also a phenomenon that sentient beings possess that is suitable to be transformed into the form bodies called the developmental lineage.

Line 2 of Verse 31—"And of being a nature whose entity is moist [with compassion]"—refers to the developmental lineage. There is a potential that is

suitable to be transformed into a buddha's body that exists on the minds of sentient beings' that are empty of inherent existence, empty of existing from their own side.

The point the text is making here is that there is something in every sentient being that allows them to develop compassion. We can say they all have the seed of compassion. We have discussed this in the last lesson.

There isn't a sentient being for whom we have not developed compassion before. You can relate this to how there isn't any sentient being that has never been our loved one in the past. There isn't any sentient being who has never been our mother. As such, we must have had compassion for every sentient being, individually, sometime in the past. If nothing obstructs the arising of compassion, then we cannot say that we are not able to develop compassion towards all sentient beings.

If we are free of the obstructions such as anger and attachment, and if all the favourable conditions are gathered, we can develop the compassion focussing on all sentient beings. This means that it is possible to develop bodhicitta. And if you can develop bodhicitta, you can infer that it is possible then to achieve enlightenment. If you say that you can achieve enlightenment and since all sentient beings can develop such compassion, by extension, we can say then that all sentient beings possess the buddha lineage, i.e., there is something within every sentient being that will allow them to be enlightened.

#### 2. The causes

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].

Verse 30 (c, d) is a brief explanation of the meaning of the second aspect, the causes. A further explanation of those four points can be found, starting from Verse 32.

Verse 32

- (1) Hatred for the [Great Vehicle] doctrine, (2) view of self,
- (3) Fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence [and thus seeking one's own peace and happiness],

And (4) not having concern for the welfare of sentient beings

Are the four forms of obstructions [preventing manifestation of the Buddha nature respectively]

Of (1) those of great desire [who do not at all abandon cyclic existence], (2) Forders, (3) Hearers, and (4) the Self-Arisen.

The causes of purifying [those] are the four aspects

Of the practices of special devotion [to the Great Vehicle] and so forth.

# ~ The four obstructions

• The first obstruction is: "(1) Hatred for the [Great Vehicle] doctrine," the "doctrine" here referring to the Mahayana doctrine.

- The second obstruction is: the "(2) view of self."
- The third obstruction is: the "(3) Fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence [and thus seeking one's own peace and happiness]." It is not simply seeking one's own welfare alone. You may be afraid of the suffering of cyclic existence but your fear is also tied up with a personal obsession with your own welfare only. This comes at the expense of others, meaning that you give up on sentient beings.
- The fourth obstruction is: "(4) not having concern for the welfare of sentient beings." What this means is that you do not take the personal responsibility to free sentient beings from suffering, saying "I will do this myself." You don't have such a wish so this becomes an obstruction.

# ~ The four types of persons who possess these obstructions

As for the people who possess these obstructions, they are "(1) those of great desire [who do not at all abandon cyclic existence], (2) Forders, (3) Hearers and (4) the Self-Arisen." The self-arisen are the solitary realisers.

## ~ The antidotes to the obstructions

The antidotes to these obstructions are mentioned in Verse 32, "The causes for purifying [those] are the four aspects of the practices of special devotion [to the Great Vehicle] and so forth."

- The antidote to the first obstruction—the hatred for the Mahayana doctrine—is devotion to the Mahayana doctrine.
- The antidote to the second obstruction—the view of self—is the wisdom realising selflessness.
- The antidote to the third obstruction—the fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence— is the uncommon Mahayana meditative stabilisation called the meditative stabilisation of the sky treasure.
- The antidote to the fourth obstruction—not having concern for the welfare of sentient beings—is great compassion.

Sentient beings can be broadly classified into three types:-

- 1. The first type of sentient beings is those who are in love with samsara. They are said to have fallen into the extreme of samsara.
- 2. The second type of sentient beings is sentient beings that desire liberation. They are also called those who have fallen into the extreme of peace or nirvana.
- 3. The third type of sentient beings is those who are not in accord with those who desire samsara, nor are they in accord with those who desire nirvana. They are persons who have not fallen into either extremes.

## ~ Sentient beings who have fallen into the extreme of samsara

The first type of sentient beings who have fallen into the extreme of samsara are said to consist of two groups:

- 1. Those who completely reject the existence of nirvana, saying that there is no such thing as nirvana, completely denying the existence of liberation.
- 2. Those who believe that liberation exists; yet, they do not engage in virtue but only engage in non-virtue, so much so that in some texts, they are labelled as those whose lineage is broken. It may seem that they are the hopeless ones but that is

not the reality. It may be the case that in a particular rebirth, they are unable to develop any renunciation or the wish for liberation to free themselves from the sufferings of that rebirth. But this is not a permanent situation for them.

There are those who do not accept the Mahayana doctrine, i.e., they only accept the Hinayana doctrine, but they are interested in liberation. Such people are only suitable vessels for the practice of the higher training of ethics. They are not suitable recipients for the teachings on even coarse selflessness. For instance, among the various sub-sects of the proponents of the Hinayana, there is a sect called the Vatsiputriyans who are not suitable receptacles for the teachings on coarse selflessness. They accept only the Hinayana doctrine and do not accept the Mahayana doctrine at all. So there is such a group of people who have that hatred for the Mahayana doctrine. They are considered to be among those seeking samsara.

## ~ Sentient beings who have fallen into the extreme of nirvana

For the second type of sentient beings who have fallen into the extreme of nirvana and desire liberation, this group of people can also be divided into two:

- 1. Those who are abiding in the non-method (or the incorrect method)
- 2. Those who are abiding in the method (or the correct method).

Let us consider those who desire liberation and are said to have fallen into the extreme of nirvana but are abiding in the non-method. For example, the Vatsiputriyans assert a self. Although they desire liberation, they are holding on to this view of a self and therefore, are abiding in something which is not the method.

From this, you can see that there are also different types of Vatsiputriyans:

- Earlier on, we saw how there were some Vatsiputriyans who do not desire liberation and criticise the Mahayana.
- Here, we have some Vatsiputriyans who desire liberation; yet are abiding in an incorrect method. This group of Vatsiputriyans do not criticise the Mahayana.

Here, it is saying that there are Buddhists who are in love with samsara, do not like nirvana and criticise the Mahayana at the same time.

Then there are also Buddhists who desire liberation but they are using an incorrect method to achieve their goal. However, they do not criticise the Mahayana.

Then there are those who desire liberation but who have not yet realised the final mode of abiding of all phenomena, the ultimate nature of phenomena, but they think that they have realised it. They also belong to the category of those who desire liberation but are abiding in an incorrect method. In fact, these practitioners cling on to emptiness as being truly existent. The proponents of the Mind Only School (MOS) and the Autonomy Middle Way School (AMWS) fall into this category because they assert true existence. As such, even the proponents of the MOS and the AMWS who desire liberation are nevertheless abiding in something that is not the method.

The relationship between the four types of persons, the four obstructions and the three types of sentient beings

There are four types of persons who possess the four obstructions.

The first of the four obstructions is the hatred for the Mahayana doctrine. The persons who have hatred for the Mahayana doctrine falls under the first category of sentient beings, those who love samsara and do not want nirvana, i.e., "those of great desire [who do not at all abandon cyclic existence]."

For the second obstruction, the view of the self, this relates to the category of people who desire liberation but are abiding in something that is not the method, i.e., the "forders."

The "hearers" and the solitary realisers (or the "self-arisen") are those who desire liberation and are also abiding in the correct method in that they directly perceive selflessness. They belong to the category of sentient beings that desire liberation and have fallen into the extreme of nirvana but are abiding in the correct method.

The main difference between those who are abiding in the non-method and those who are abiding in the method is determined by whether they have realised that persons and phenomena are empty of true existence:

- Those who realise that persons and phenomena are empty of true existence are those who are abiding in the method.
- Those who have not realised that the persons and phenomena are empty of true existence—in particular, those who cling on to emptiness to be truly existent—are those who are abiding in the non-method (or the incorrect method).

In the context here, 'method' refers to the wisdom directly perceiving the emptiness of true existence. Also, 'method' here is related to wisdom, not to the mind generation (or the method aspect of the path). If you were to understand 'method' here to mean the mind generation, then even the hearers and solitary realisers will not be considered to be abiding in the method.

The third type of sentient beings is those who do not abide in the extreme of samsara or the extreme of nirvana. We are now talking about the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta. Such people are trained in the path that brings an end to the extreme of samsara and the extreme of nirvana. This type of sentient beings is the Mahayanists, as Mahayanists neither abide in the extreme of samsara nor the extreme of nirvana.

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*Question:* For persons holding the view of the MOS as well as persons holding the view of the AMWS, since they would be grasping at inherent existence even though they have the mind generation in their mind continua, would they not be categorised with the second obstruction, the view of the self?

*Answer*: There could be such bodhisattvas.

*Question:* This would mean that the third category of sentient beings—those who are neither abiding in the extreme of samsara or nirvana and who have mind generation—can also be categorised with the obstruction of the view of self?

*Answer:* There could be bodhisattvas who are abiding in the non-method. Bodhisattvas do not abide in both extremes of samsara and nirvana. This is different

from saying that bodhisattvas are *necessarily* those who are not abiding in the two extremes.

The bodhisattvas who are in the third category (of sentient beings who are neither abiding in the extreme of samsara or nirvana) are only bodhisattvas who hold the Prasangika view.

*Student:* The view of self was related to the category of those holding the tenets of the MOS or the AMWS. But in this text, such persons are called forders?

*Answer:* The Buddha said that those who hold on to the view of a self are similar to forders. In one sutra, the Buddha said, "I am not the teacher of those who hold on to a view of self. Those who hold on to a view of self are those who go from darkness to darkness."

Forders cover everyone—with the exception of the Prasangikas—who does not have the correct view of emptiness. This will include the proponents of the MOS and the AMWS. Even though they desire liberation from cyclic existence, nevertheless, they are called forders.

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The way to cultivate the antidotes is this: You need a very strong belief in and devotion towards the Mahayana doctrine. Once you have that, there is the chance to develop great compassion and bodhicitta with which you enter the Mahayana path. Later on, you develop the uncommon meditative stabilisation of the Mahayana, i.e., the uncommon calm abiding. Then you develop special insight followed by the concentration that is a union of calm abiding and special insight. With this special concentration, you are fully equipped to engage in the path that can destroy the four obstructions by cultivating the antidotes. Then gradually you progress and it is possible to actualise the dharmakaya.

Verse 33

Those who have the seed which is devotion to the Supreme Vehicle, The mother which is the wisdom giving birth to the Buddha qualities,

The womb which is the bliss of concentration, and the nurse which is compassion

Are the [Bodhisattva] children born from [the mind of] the Subduer.

"Those who have the seed which is devotion to the Supreme Vehicle": In order to be born as the son of a wheel-turning king, there must be the seed of the father. Likewise, one must have devotion to the Mahayana that is the seed for enlightenment. That devotion is likened to a seed.

"The mother which is the wisdom giving birth to the Buddha qualities": "The mother" here refers to the wisdom realising emptiness that is conjoined with the method aspect of the path. In the teachings, you will find such an expression, the mother.

The wisdom realising emptiness is the common cause for achieving the hearers' enlightenment, the solitary realisers' enlightenment and the full enlightenment of buddhahood. As such, the wisdom realising emptiness is like the mother that is the common cause. The father, called method, is the uncommon cause for actualising the dharmakaya.

"The womb which is the bliss of concentration": Returning to the analogy of being born as the son of a wheel-turning king, we need something from the father and something from the mother. But in order to grow, we need a safe place, which is the womb. This is an analogy of what happens on the path. "The womb" here is "the bliss of concentration."

"And the nurse which is compassion": In order for the young prince to grow up and become the wheel-turning king, i.e., someone who has the ability to take over the reins from his father, the wheel-turning king, he must be well taken care of by a nanny or a caretaker. Likewise, here on the path, in order to move towards enlightenment, the nanny or the caretaker is compassion. It is mentioned in the teachings that compassion is important in the beginning, it is important in the middle and it is important at the end.

MEANING OF VERSE 33		
"Those who have the seed which	Devotion to the Mahayana is likened to the seed that gives bir	
is devotion to the Supreme	to the son of a wheel-turning king.	
Vehicle."		
"The mother which is the wisdom giving birth to the Buddha qualities."	The wisdom realising emptiness that is conjoined with the method aspect of the path is likened to a mother that is the common cause for the attainment of the hearers' enlightenment, the solitary realisers' enlightenment and the full enlightenment of buddhahood.	
"The womb which is the bliss of concentration."	The bliss of concentration is likened to the safety of dwelling within a womb.	
"The nurse which is compassion."	On the path to enlightenment, compassion is said to be important in the beginning, the middle and the end. Here it is likened to a nanny or a caretaker.	

Here we are talking about the bodhisattvas. By abandoning all obscurations, there will come a time when the bodhisattvas will actualise the dharmakaya.

Devotion to the Mahayana doctrine is faith. There are different kinds of faith. The faith referred to here is the faith of conviction. You will recall that faith is the forerunner of all virtue. Without it, nothing positive or virtuous can be accomplished.

Aspiration is preceded by faith. Once you have faith, the next thing that comes is aspiration. As such, with the faith of conviction in the Mahayana, that can help you to aspire to enlightenment. With that faith in the Mahayana, you can develop great compassion followed by the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta, which is essentially an aspiration for full enlightenment.

Once you have the aspiration for and seek enlightenment, naturally you will investigate and wonder, "What do I need to do in order to achieve enlightenment?

What are the causes for my enlightenment?" You would then seek out those causes.

When you seek out the causes for enlightenment, there will come a time when you will seek to achieve the union of calm abiding and special insight. Through that effort, you are able to train to actualise the union of calm abiding and special insight. Once you achieve the union of calm abiding and special sight, you possess the antidote that is able to destroy those four obstructions that were mentioned earlier.

In short, through your devotion to the Mahayana, you develop great compassion and bodhicitta. Then you enter the path and once you develop the union of calm abiding and special insight, that concentration and wisdom, you have in your hand the antidote that can completely wipe out the four obstructions. Gradually you will achieve the dharmakaya.

Since the dharmakaya is achievable, this goes back to proving that the mind is in the nature of clear light.

The persons who fall into the third category—those who do not abide in either the extremes of samsara or nirvana—are those who truly and sincerely aspire for full enlightenment, the non-abiding nirvana. Such great beings do not take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions, but rather through the power of their prayers, motivated by their great compassion wanting to free others from their suffering.

The very thing that makes all of this possible is great compassion from which comes the wholehearted resolve and the taking on of personal responsibility. From that, one is able to develop the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta. This makes everything else possible.

# 3.—4. The effect and the function

Verse 34 a. b

The perfection of the qualities of purity, self, bliss,

And permanence [of the Truth Body which is the fruit of purifying the obstructions through their antidotes] is the fruit.

This is the topic of the effect.

Verse 34 c. d

[The lineage] has the function of [bringing about] aversion for the suffering [of cyclic existence]

And the aspiration as well as the wish to attain the peace [of nirvana].

This is the topic of the function.

THE FOUR OBSTRUCTIONS	PERSONS WITH SUCH OBSTRUCTIONS	THE ANTIDOTE	TYPES OF SENTIENT BEINGS
Hatred for the Mahayana doctrine.	Those of great desire.	Devotion to the Mahayana doctrine.	Those who have fallen into the extreme of samsara.
View of self	The forders.	The wisdom realising emptiness.	Those who have fallen into the extreme of nirvana and is abiding in the nonmethod.
Fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence.	The hearers.	An uncommon Mahayana meditative stabilisation called the meditative stabilisation of the sky treasure.	Those who have fallen into the extreme of nirvana and is abiding in the correct method, i.e., they directly realise selflessness.
Not having concern for the welfare of sentient beings.	The self-arisen or solitary realisers.	Great compassion.	Those who have fallen into the extreme of nirvana and is abiding in the correct method, i.e., they directly realise selflessness.

	THE THREE TYPES OF SENTIENT BEINGS
First type	<ol> <li>Sentient beings who have fallen into the extreme of samsara. Two divisions:</li> <li>Those who completely reject the existence of nirvana and deny the existence of liberation.</li> <li>Those who believe that liberation exists, but while they have this belief, they</li> </ol>
	do not engage in virtue but only engage in non-virtue.
Second type	Sentient beings who desire liberation and have fallen into the extreme of nirvana. Two divisions:  1. Those who are abiding in the non-method (or incorrect method). 2. Those who are abiding in the method.
Third type	Sentient beings who neither abide in the extreme of samsara nor in the extreme of nirvana. These are the Mahayanists who are trained in the path that will bring an end to the extremes of samsara and nirvana.

The main difference between those who are abiding in the non-method and those who are abiding in the method is determined by whether they have realised that persons and phenomena are empty of true existence:

- Those who realise that persons and phenomena are empty of true existence are those who are abiding in the method.
- Those who have not realised that the persons and phenomena are empty of true existence—in particular, those who cling on to emptiness to be truly existent—are those who are abiding in the non-method (or the incorrect method).

In the context here, 'method' refers to the wisdom directly perceiving the emptiness of true existence. Also, 'method' here is related to wisdom, not to the mind generation (or the method aspect of the path).

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