

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 14

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Explaining the verse from the Vajra Cutter Sutra (cont’d): “An drop of dew, or a bubble.” Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 30—37. Clear light nature of the mind: The ten aspects (cont’d). Reviewing Verses 30—33: (1) The entity & (2) The causes. Verses 34—37: (3) The effects. Connecting Verse 27 with Verse 34.

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!

“A drop of dew, or a bubble”

The analogy of “a drop of dew” is helpful in understanding the faults or the disadvantages of cyclic existence. Let us say there is a drop of dew on the tip of a flower petal or a blade of grass. When the sun rises, the drop of dew will evaporate very quickly.

Any phenomenon that comes into being through the aggregation of causes and conditions—that is, all composed (or conditioned, compounded, composite) phenomena—is essentially impermanent. Impermanence means that they have the nature of disintegrating from moment to moment. All impermanent phenomena are established in the nature of disintegrating momentarily.

What causes impermanent phenomena to have this nature? The cause is none other than the very cause that brought about the production of the impermanent phenomenon in question in the first place.

We should apply our understanding of impermanence to the things that we

experience in life, starting with our body, our loved ones, our possessions and so forth. The point is to see how they are impermanent in nature and that they are undergoing change and disintegrating from moment to moment. They are not stable and there will come a time when these things will cease to exist. If we understand that this is the nature of composed phenomena, this will help us to have less clinging and less attachment to these things.

We can derive the same understanding from the analogy of the bubble. A bubble easily can cease to exist. All you need to do is to poke it and it will just disappear. If we look at the nature of the water bubble, it comes from water. When you poke the water bubble, it bursts, disintegrates and becomes water again.

When we talk about feelings, we can divide feelings into three types—pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings and neutral feelings.

Let us look at unpleasant feelings. When an unpleasant feeling arises, it arises in the nature of pain or suffering. That is its nature.

Our pleasant feelings are essentially the feeling of contaminated pleasure. When the feeling of contaminated pleasure or happiness arises, it arises in the nature of suffering. However, although that is the reality, we don't recognise this because it is not apparent to us. When that feeling of contaminated pleasure ceases, it also disintegrates in the nature of suffering. So it arises in the nature of suffering and it disintegrates in the nature of suffering.

Neutral feelings are also in the nature of suffering. That is also not apparent to us and we do not recognise it. We do not even know that they are in the nature of suffering. Neutral feelings are the foundation or the basis for other sufferings and it also induces other sufferings.

The water bubble is analogous of how all our feelings of pleasure and suffering and neutral feelings are in the nature of suffering. Although they appear differently, they are all in the nature of suffering just as a water bubble arises in the nature of water, and then dissolves back into the nature of water. Likewise, whether it is the feeling of pleasure, pain or a neutral feeling, although we think they are different, actually they are all the same, i.e., they are all in the nature of suffering.

When we come across analogies in the *Vajra Cutter Sutra* such as “a drop of dew, or a bubble,” that is advice for us to reflect on and to be reminded of the faults and disadvantages of our samsara.

Although the feelings of pleasure, suffering and neutral feelings appear different, we do not recognize that they are all in the nature of suffering. This is especially so with regard to the pleasurable feelings we experience. We cannot imagine and see how they can be in the nature of suffering but in reality, that is the case.

However, the superior beings see suffering as suffering, and they see that which is in the nature of suffering to be in the nature of suffering. They see things as they are. As a result, true suffering is a truth for the superior ones, and therefore, it is called a noble truth, i.e., literally, a truth for the superiors.

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

We have started looking at the ten aspects that show that the mind is in the nature of clear light. If you want to look at these ten aspects in a simple way, then they can look simple. But if you think and try to examine them more deeply, you will see that they are really challenging.

Reviewing Verses 30—33: (1) the entity, (2) the causes

The first of these ten aspects is the aspect of the entity, which basically talks about how the mind is in the nature of clear light. That is explained through the analogy of the purity of a jewel, space and water as in Verse 30 (a, b).

Verse 30 a, b

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

Although our mind is in the nature of clear light, it is not called the truth body or the dharmakaya. In order for our mind to be transformed into the truth body, there must be the causes for that transformation to take place. Therefore, the second aspect is the aspect of the causes, which seeks to explain how that transformation can come about when all the causes are present. These are mentioned briefly in Verse 30 (c, d).

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].

These are the four causes that must be present to effect the transformation of the mind into the dharmakaya:

1. devotion to the Mahayana (or Great Vehicle) doctrine
2. the wisdom realising selflessness
3. concentration or meditative stabilisation
4. compassion

These four are causes but they are also antidotes. If they are antidotes, what are they antidotes to? If there are four antidotes, there must be four obstacles or obscurations. The four obstacles are listed in 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 obscurations are:

1. dislike and hatred for the Mahayana
2. the view of self
3. fear of the sufferings of samsara
4. not having concern for the welfare of sentient beings, i.e., not having the wholehearted resolve that comes from generating the personal responsibility, thinking, "I will work for the benefit of sentient beings by myself alone."

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.

Verse 33 seeks to explain how a bodhisattva is born and how that bodhisattva gradually becomes enlightened by using the analogy of a prince who is born to a wheel-turning king.

What are the causes then that must be completed before the transformation of the mind into the dharmakaya can happen?

- First, you need great devotion, belief in and aspiration for the Mahayana.
- Once you have that, there is the opportunity to develop great compassion.
- Once great compassion is developed, there is the opportunity to develop the mind of enlightenment.
- And once the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta, is generated, as a bodhisattva, one is able to cultivate the union of calm-abiding and special insight.

The bodhisattva then will have the complete causes that enable him to actualise the dharmakaya.

Devotion to the Mahayana means having faith in the Mahayana. Of the different kinds of faith, it is the faith of conviction in the presentation of causality as presented in the Mahayana. When one has this faith of conviction in the Mahayana, one can induce a mind that yearns for enlightenment and yearns for the Mahayana. It is a mind that seeks and wants enlightenment, it wants the Mahayana.

The faith of conviction in the Mahayana can induce the yearning for full enlightenment. When one truly aspires for enlightenment that would, in turn, induce a strong yearning to search for the causes of enlightenment. On the basis of that, one cultivates the calm-abiding of the Mahayana. One cultivates the special insight of the Mahayana. One then achieves the union of these two, calm-abiding and special insight. Once one achieves that, one has the full and complete causes for achieving enlightenment. From then on, one gradually progresses towards the actualisation of omniscience.

3. *The effects*

The next aspect is the effects. Once you have the causes for actualising the dharmakaya, then what are the effects that are achieved?

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.

Earlier on, Verse 27 seeks to prove the existence of the tathagata essence in all sentient beings:

- “Because a perfect Buddha’s body is pervasive”: This is an explanation from the perspective of the result.
- “Because suchness is without differentiation”: This is an explanation from the perspective of the nature.
- “Because a [Buddha] lineage exists”: This is an explanation from the perspective of the cause.

~ *The connection between Verses 27 and 34*

I think perhaps one can relate the explanation of how the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings from the perspective of the result to “the perfection of the quality of purity” stated in Verse 34.

“Because a perfect Buddha’s body is pervasive” explains the presence of the tathagata essence in all sentient beings from the perspective of the result. It is saying that the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya are continuously emanating to and engaging with all sentient beings.

The dharmakaya acts as the condition for showing sentient beings the Dharma. When the Dharma is revealed to sentient beings, there will be sentient beings that develop interest and belief in or devotion towards the Dharma. With that devotion towards the Dharma, they can then proceed towards achieving the dharmakaya themselves. So among the four effects (or results), the first is the perfection of the quality of purity.

With regard to the second effect—the perfection of the quality of self—I think you can relate this to the second line in Verse 27, “Because suchness is without differentiation.” The perfection of the quality of self is achieved through the wisdom that has suchness as its object that realises the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. The ultimate form of the wisdom that has suchness as its object is none other than the dharmakaya.

In the discussion of this line in Verse 27, it was explained that the indispensable object for the wisdom is none other than suchness or reality. So the second effect of the four effects is posited to be the perfection of the quality of self.

The third line of Verse 27—“Because a [Buddha] lineage exists”—is an explanation of how all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence from the perspective of the cause. In this context here, “lineage” refers to the developmental lineage. Because the developmental lineage exists in the minds of sentient beings, therefore the cultivation of compassion is possible. Then there is the development of concentration and so forth. The two results are the perfection of the quality of bliss and the perfection of the quality of permanence.

In Verse 34, four qualities are stated:

1. the perfection of the quality of purity
2. the perfection of the quality of self
3. the perfection of the quality of bliss
4. the perfection of the quality of permanence

These four qualities are the effects or the results.

If you link them with the aspects of the entity of the lineage and the causes for the transformation of that lineage into the dharmakaya, the perfection of the quality of purity:

- Is related to the first line of Verse 27, “Because the Buddha’s body is pervasive.”
- Linking that to the aspect of the causes (or antidotes), it is the first of the four antidotes, devotion to the doctrine. It was said earlier that the enlightened activities of the dharmakaya is a condition for the revelation of the Dharma to sentient beings. This can cause sentient beings to develop devotion for the doctrine. As a result of such devotion, they then proceed towards actualising the dharmakaya.
- At the time of the effect, this is the perfection of the quality of purity.

The second effect, the perfection of the quality of self:

- Is related to the second line of Verse 27—“Because suchness is without differentiation”—which explains how the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings through the perspective of the nature.
- When related to the four antidotes, it is the antidote of the wisdom realising selflessness.
- The effect or result of that is the perfection of the quality of self.

The perfection of the quality of bliss and permanence:

- Is related to the third line of Verse 27—“Because a [Buddha] lineage exists.” In this context here, the lineage primarily refers to the developmental lineage.
- Because the developmental lineage exists, therefore one can cultivate and develop compassion and concentration, the remaining two causes or antidotes.
- The results are the perfection of the quality of bliss and the perfection of the quality permanence.

PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF THE TATHAGATA ESSENCE (VERSE 27)	ASPECT OF THE CAUSES (VERSE 30 C, D)	ASPECT OF THE EFFECTS (OR RESULTS) (VERSE 34)
“Because the Buddha’s body is pervasive”: The explanation from the perspective of the result.	“(1) Devotion to the [Great Vehicle] doctrine.”	The perfection of the quality of purity.
“Because suchness is without differentiation”: The explanation from the perspective of the nature.	“(2) The higher wisdom [realizing selflessness].”	The perfection of the quality of self.
“Because a [Buddha] lineage exists”: The explanation from the perspective of the cause.	“(3) [The immeasurable] meditative stabilization [endowed with bliss].”	The perfection of the quality of bliss.
	“(4) Compassion [for sentient beings].”	The perfection of the quality of permanence.

~ *Extensive presentation of the aspect of the effects*

Verse 35

In brief the fruits of these [four causes, devotion to the Great Vehicle and so forth, Are attainments of the four qualities] distinguished as Purity and so forth [i.e., self, bliss, and permanence] through being antidotes That are opposite to the four erroneous aspects [impurity and so forth] with respect to the Truth Body.

“The four erroneous aspects” are related to the ultimate mode of abiding of phenomena. There are also four erroneous aspects that are related to the conventional mode of abiding of phenomena.

I would think it is alright to posit the four erroneous aspects that are related to the conventional mode of abiding of phenomena are the four erroneous views that we usually talk about, that is:

1. apprehending that which is impermanent to be permanent
2. apprehending that which is unclean to be clean
3. apprehending that which is in nature of suffering to be happiness
4. apprehending that which is selfless as having a self

“That are opposite to the four erroneous aspects with respect to the Truth Body” is a discussion of the four erroneous aspects with respect to the ultimate mode of abiding of phenomena.

The four aspects (or attributes) of true suffering are:

1. impermanent
2. miserable (or of a suffering nature)
3. empty
4. selfless

The four erroneous views from the perspective of the ultimate mode of abiding means to apprehend:

- impermanence as truly existent
- misery or that which is in the nature of suffering as truly existent
- that which is empty as truly existent
- that which is selfless as truly existent

‘Selfless’ here is posited to be coarse selflessness so this is apprehending coarse selflessness to be truly existent.

The result of applying the antidote of devotion to the Mahayana doctrine is the perfection of the quality of purity. What is posited as this quality? The perfection of the quality of purity is the final sphere of reality that is purified of the afflictive obscurations and knowledge obscurations. It is a purity because it is purified of the two obscurations.

The perfection of the quality of self is achieved through cultivating the perfection of wisdom, i.e., the wisdom directly realising emptiness. What this wisdom realises is the ultimate final nature of phenomena, their lack of a self. This is like the space-like

emptiness that is devoid of all elaborations. Such a sphere is the ultimate nature of reality, the suchness of phenomena. It is the ultimate mode of abiding of phenomena.

It is said that through meditating on the sky treasure meditative stabilisation, one can achieve the dharmakaya that pervades all phenomena. The dharmakaya is such that it pervades all of space, i.e., wherever there is space, the dharmakaya is there. It pervades the entire existence. This is the perfection of the quality of bliss.

Here we are talking about enlightenment and buddhahood. The result of meditating on compassion is that a buddha is able to work for numberless sentient beings for as long as space exists and for as long as sentient beings exist. A buddha continuously engages sentient beings without interruption. This is what you have to understand when we talk about the last quality here, the perfection of the quality of permanence. Because of meditating on compassion, the buddhas work for sentient beings uninterruptedly and continuously without a break; that is, they are working eternally for sentient beings.

Verse 36

Because that [Truth Body] is naturally pure [from the start]
And because [the adventitious defilements as well as] the
predispositions are abandoned, [this possession of the two types
of purity] is [a perfection of] purity.

Because the elaborations of [the conception of] of self [imputed by
the Forders] and of the selflessness [conceived by Hearers and
so forth]

Have been pacified, it is [a perfection of] holy self.

Verse 37

Because the [subtle] aggregates which have a mental nature
And their cause [the level of the predispositions of ignorance] have
been removed, it is just [a perfection of] bliss.

Because cyclic existence and nirvana are realized as equal [in
nature]

It is [a perfection of] permanence [that is, unbroken (fulfillment) of
the two aims].

The perfection of the quality of purity is the dharmakaya. Two reasons are given for why this is so:

1. because “that [Truth Body] is naturally pure [from the start]”
2. “because [the adventitious defilements as well as] the predispositions are abandoned”

“Because the elaborations of [the conception of] self [imputed by the Forders] and of the selflessness [conceived by Hearers and so forth]/ Have been pacified”: The dharmakaya is also the perfection of the quality of self because the dharmakaya is the stillness and pacification of the view of the self that is “[imputed by the Forders]” as well as a pacification of all elaborations of true existence. Such pacification is complete and permanent in that the view of self and the elaborations of true existence will not arise any more. So it is a subsidence of all elaborations and the stillness and pacification of true existence. In fact, the subsidence of all elaborations

of true existence is a subsidence of all duality. As such, it is a perfection of the ultimate or holy self.

The dharmakaya is the perfection of the quality of bliss, “Because the subtle aggregates which have a mental nature and their cause [the level of the predispositions of ignorance]¹ have been removed.” The causes are the removal of:

1. the level of the predispositions of ignorance
2. the uncontaminated karma

Because these two causes have been removed, so the dharmakaya is the perfection of the quality of bliss.

The dharmakaya is the perfection of the quality of permanence, “Because cyclic existence and nirvana are realized as equal [in nature].” As such, it is the ultimate final freedom from the two extremes.

This is the explanation of the third aspect, the fruits or the effects, i.e., how the dharmakaya is these four qualities.

The perfection of the quality of purity exists only on the buddha ground. The hearers and solitary realiser arhats and even the eighth ground bodhisattvas do not possess this perfection because they still possess the obstacles that hinder the achievement of this perfection.

The hearers, solitary realiser arhats and the bodhisattvas who have achieved mastery do not possess the perfection of the quality of purity because they still have the level of the predispositions of ignorance, the subtle elaborations of the appearance of true existence.

Likewise, these beings including the bodhisattvas who have achieved mastery do not have the quality of the perfection of bliss because they still have that body of a mental nature that arises from the uncontaminated karma motivated by the level of the predispositions of ignorance.

The point is that because of the elaborations of true existence, one accumulates karma. For these beings, they accumulate uncontaminated karma, resulting in the production of a mental body. As such, they do not achieve the perfection of the quality of bliss.

Also, once they have this body of a mental nature, they have to experience the inconceivable transference of death. They have to die in that way. Because they undergo this inconceivable transference of death, they do not possess the perfection of the quality of permanence.

Summary

These perfections of the qualities of purity, self, bliss and permanence only exist on the buddha ground. The hearers arhats, solitary realiser arhats and the bodhisattvas abiding on the pure grounds do not possess these qualities.

¹ The level of predisposition of ignorance is the predisposition of grasping at true existence. (Page 3, Lesson 19, First Basic Program, Module 10).

Why do these qualities only exist on the buddha ground?

1. Non-buddhas do not possess the perfection of the quality of purity. In order to possess that, the two obscurations must be removed. Only the buddhas have done that.
2. You have to relate the perfection of the quality of self to the elaborations of true existence. In order to achieve the dharmakaya, in order to have the perfection of the quality of self, there has to be a direct realisation of emptiness in which all elaborations of true existence have been pacified including the appearance of true existence, such that one will never ever have to rise again from that equipoise. This applies only to a buddha.

Why is the perfection of the quality of self like that? It has to be a realisation whereby you need not have to arise from it ever again. You are directly immersed in emptiness whereby all elaborations of true existence—including all appearances of true existence—are pacified to the extent that there is no more arising from that, i.e., there is no need to arise from that any more.

What is the problem if there is still the appearance of duality, if there is still any form of the elaborations of true existence? This would mean that there is still the accumulation of uncontaminated karma that leads to the acquisition of a kind of embodiment; in this case, a mental body or a body of mental nature. Once you have a mental body, you do not have the perfection of the quality of bliss.

The perfection of the quality of bliss is a quality that arises through the extinguishment of the mental body. The mental body undergoes birth and death. What is born, dies but the birth and death of such an aggregate are not due to karma and afflictions. Nevertheless, the mental body has to undergo the inconceivable transference of death. The perfection of the quality of permanence is a quality that is free from the inconceivable transference of death.

If you analyse the words of this root text, there is so much to think about. It is very deep and profound, and difficult. When you examine it in a simple way, it is straightforward. You just have to know that there are these four qualities, why only the buddhas have them and why the non-buddhas do not. If you want to look at it in a simple way, it is not difficult.

Why do only the buddhas have the perfection of the quality of purity? Why is it that the non-buddhas do not have this perfection? As stated in Verse 36, it is because the truth body, the dharmakaya, is naturally pure and because the predispositions have been abandoned. Therefore, it is the perfection of purity and freedom from the two obscurations. That's it.

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