

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

Lesson 16

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Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 97, 98, 100—115. The nine examples that explain how the defilements are adventitious and the nine meanings that pertain to the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena.

Among the ten aspects that explain how the mind is in the nature of clear light, we have completed the first three—the entity, the causes and the effects. The fourth aspect is the function but for the time being, we will leave it at that. If there is time, we may come back to this.

Now, let us jump to the explanation of how the defilements are adventitious through the nine examples.

In *The Tathagata Essence*, nine examples and nine meanings are taught to establish that the defilements are adventitious. Through that, what is driven at is that the tathagata essence or the nature of the mind is clear light.

The verses prior to Verse 96 are the extensive explanations of how the nature of the mind is clear light and how the buddha lineage exists. From Verse 96 onwards is an explanation of how the defilements are adventitious and how they are enveloping or covering up the tathagata essence. Nine examples are given and correspondingly nine meanings are conveyed through those examples.

Why are there nine examples? Because there are nine meanings that pertain to the nine obscurations that are in the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena. These are:

1—3: the seeds of the three poisons, i.e., ignorance, anger and attachment that are dormant.

4: the strong manifest afflictions of ignorance, anger and attachment. These three are

counted as one.

5: the level of the predispositions of ignorance

6: the path of seeing abandonments

7: the path of meditation abandonments

8: the obscurations of the impure grounds, i.e., the first to the seventh grounds

9: the obscurations of the pure grounds, i.e., the eighth to the tenth grounds

These nine obscurations are the nine meanings exemplified by the nine examples.

ESTABLISHING THE OBSCURATIONS TO BE ADVENTITIOUS THROUGH THE NINE EXAMPLES			
THE OBSCURATIONS	THE EXAMPLES	THE OBSCURED	THE OBSCURING
1. Dormant attachment.	“A Buddha [dwelling inside] an ugly lotus.”	A buddha	Ugly lotus
2. Dormant anger.	“Honey in [the middle of many] bees.”	Honey	Bees
3. Dormant ignorance.	“A kernel inside a husk.”	Kernel	Husk
4. The strong manifest afflictions of ignorance, anger and attachment.	“Gold within filth.”	Gold	Filth
5. The level of the predispositions of ignorance.	“A treasury [of jewels] in the earth [under the house of the destitute].”	Buried treasury of jewels	Earth
6. The path of seeing abandonments.	“[The capacity of growing stalks] and so forth [existing] in a small seed.”	Capacity to grow into a tree	Seed
7. The path of meditation abandonments.	“The image of a Conqueror [made from precious substance] inside a tattered garment.”	Image of a buddha	Tattered garment
8. The obscurations of the impure grounds, i.e., first to seventh grounds.	“A lord of humans [who is a Universal Monarch] inside the womb of a lowly woman.”	A baby who will become a wheel-turning king	Womb of a lowly woman
9. The obscurations of the pure grounds, i.e., eighth to tenth grounds	“A precious [golden] image in an earthen [mold].”	Precious golden image	Earthen mould

In explaining each of these examples, there is the object that is being obscured (the obscured) and the object that is obscuring.

Verse 97

Like a Buddha [dwelling inside] an ugly lotus, honey in [the middle of many] bees,
A kernel inside a husk, gold within filth,
A treasury [of jewels] in the earth [under the house of the destitute, the capacity
Of growing] stalks and so forth [existing] in a small seed,
The image of a Conqueror [made from a precious substance] inside a tattered garment,

Verse 98

A lord of humans [who is a Universal Monarch] inside the womb of a lowly woman,
And a precious [golden] image in an earthen [mold],

This [naturally pure] essential constituent dwells in sentient beings
Obscured with the adventitious defilements of afflictive emotions.

1. “A Buddha [dwelling inside] inside an ugly lotus”: Here a buddha possessing the major marks and exemplifications are abiding within the ugly lotus that obscures it.
2. “Honey in [the middle of many] bees”: A swarm of bees is covering up the honey.
3. “A kernel of grain inside a husk”: The husk is obscuring the actual barley or wheat seed that you are looking for.
4. “Gold within filth”: A piece of gold that is sunk in a mass of filth.
5. “A treasury [of jewels] in the earth [under the house of the destitute]”: A treasury of jewels is sitting beneath the house of someone who is very poor. He doesn’t even know that there is a treasure beneath the ground as it is obscured by the earth.
6. “[The capacity of growing] stalks and so forth [existing] in a small seed”: This is the example of a seed of a tree that has the potential to produce a huge tree. At the time of the seed, that potential exists within the seed.
7. “The image of a Conqueror [made from precious substance] inside a tattered garment”: This is the example of an image of a buddha that is wrapped inside a piece of tattered garment.
8. “A lord of humans [who is a Universal Monarch] inside the womb of a lowly woman”: This refers to the son of a universal wheel-turning king in the womb of a lowly woman.
9. “A precious [golden] image in an earthen [mold]”: Usually a bronze statue is cast and made from a mould. At the time of casting the statue, the statue that is cast is in the mould.

Just as these nine examples are related to the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena, there are nine examples that pertain to the class of the thoroughly purified phenomena (or the class of the thoroughly pure phenomena).

Within each example, two phenomena are mentioned. For instance, in the first example in Verse 97, “Like a Buddha [dwelling inside] an ugly lotus,” the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena is exemplified by the ugly lotus while the class of the thoroughly purified phenomena is exemplified by a buddha.

There are nine obscurations—pertaining to the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena—and these are exemplified in meaning by the nine examples.

Then there is the class of the thoroughly purified phenomena that are also exemplified in meaning by nine examples. Earlier, Verse 27 states the three reasons why sentient beings 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.

The meaning of this verse can be explained in a more extensive manner. When expanded, there are nine meanings pertaining to the class of the thoroughly pure

phenomena.

Let's start with the analogies exemplifying the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena. Then we will look at the nine analogies that exemplify the class of the thoroughly pure phenomena.

Class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena

1. "A Buddha [dwelling inside] an ugly lotus"

The first of the nine obscurations is dormant attachment, i.e., the seed of attachment, that is adventitious and exemplified by the example, "a Buddha [dwelling inside] an ugly lotus."

Verse 100

For example, a One Gone Thus blazing with the thousands [of
magnificences] of the major [and minor] marks,
Dwelling inside a lotus of ugly color
Is seen by someone having the undefiled divine eye
And is taken out from the lotus petals [to be shown to others].

Verse 101

Similarly, the One Gone To Bliss sees with the [undefiled] Buddha
eye
The reality of natural [clear light] even in those [transmigrators]
dwelling in the Most Torturous Hell,
And having a nature of compassion, dwells [here] at length
undefiled,
Releasing [trainees gradually] from defilement.

Verse 102

Just as one with the divine eye sees a One Gone Thus dwelling
Inside an ugly closed lotus and cuts away the petals [so that it may
be seen],
So the compassionate Subduer sees the essence of a perfect Buddha
[dwelling in all] transmigrators
Obstructed by the coverings of the defilements of desire, hatred,
and so forth and [engages in activities] to destroy those
defilements [of the basic constituent]

The example in Verse 100 states that there is a buddha "dwelling inside a lotus of ugly color" that is not seen by many. Someone with a divine eye sees that there is a buddha inside the lotus. By plucking away the petals, this buddha will be revealed. Similarly, the Buddha sees that even for those sentient beings who are born in the Avici hells, their minds are empty of true existence, and if they are shown the Dharma, then slowly their obscurations can be purified.

Earlier on, with regard to the tathagata essence, it was mentioned that the dharmakaya possesses the perfection of the quality of permanence. The dharmakaya engages and works for sentient beings uninterruptedly out of compassion to free sentient beings from their obscurations. Likewise, in this context here, you can say

that out of their compassion, the buddhas work to free sentient beings from the first defilement, attachment.

Buddhas see that the minds of sentient beings are empty of existing truly and the defilements obscuring their mind are adventitious. Therefore, the dharmakaya emanates and engages sentient beings, showing the path to them. In this way, sentient beings gradually free themselves from their obscurations. Since sentient beings can free themselves from their obscurations gradually, that means the obscurations can be eliminated. This means that the defilements are adventitious.

As shown by this example, when one peels off the petals of the ugly lotus one by one, gradually the buddha that is inside the lotus will be revealed. Likewise, by removing the different layers of obscurations, in the end, the dharmakaya can be actualised.

In this example, someone who is clairvoyant and possesses the divine eye sees that there is a buddha inside the ugly lotus. Many people do not see this. So he tells them, “By peeling away the petals, you will be able to find a buddha inside”. Likewise, the Buddha sees that all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence. We do not realise this. So the Buddha tells us that we have the tathagata essence and reveals the Dharma to us. In this way, we can gradually realise the dharmakaya, the nature body.

2. “Honey in [the middle of many] bees”

The next three verses—Verses 103 to 105—refer to the second example that is related to the second obscuration, dormant anger.

Verse 103

Just as a person, who is skilled [in analyzing honey], upon seeking it
Sees honey [of excellent taste and potency] surrounded [and
protected] by a swarm of bees,
And thoroughly removes it from the swarm of bees
Through [various] methods [such as using smoke and thereby gets
the honey],

Verse 104

So the great sage [Buddha], having perceived with the all-knowing
eye
The essential constituent of [individual] knowledge like honey,
Works at totally removing the obstructions, like bees,
To that [basic constituent].

Verse 105

Just as a person seeking honey, [having seen] honey obstructed by
many thousands of ten millions of bees
Removes those and makes use of the honey [for medicine, food, and
so forth] according to wish,
So the Conqueror—skilled in destroying the afflictive emotions, like
bees, [which obstruct] the uncontaminated knowledge [of
individual insight], like honey,
Existing in [all] embodied beings—is like a person skilled [in taking

honey].

A person who is looking for honey will have to get past the bees before he can retrieve the honey. The person who knows how to do that is able to skilfully extract the honey from the honeycomb by separating the bees from the honey.

Likewise, the great sage, the Buddha, sees the suchness of the minds of sentient beings. He sees that sentient beings possess the basic constituent (or tathagata essence) that is obscured temporarily. So he teaches the paths to remove those obscurations. In essence, the Buddha sees that:

- sentient beings possess the tathagata essence
- the nature of their minds is clear light
- the defilements that are obscuring the suchness of their minds are adventitious

By turning the wheel of Dharma, he then enables sentient beings to be free of the obscurations.

In this example, you can take the obscurations to mean the second obscuration, dormant anger.

3. “A kernel inside a husk”

This analogy relates to the obscuration, dormant ignorance, and is elaborated in the next three verses.

Verse 106

Just as kernels of grain in their husks
Cannot be used by people
And just as those seeking food and so forth
Remove them from the husks,

Verse 107

So the Conqueror [i.e., basic constituent] which exists in [all sentient beings
But is mixed with the defilements of the afflictive emotions—
As long as it is not freed from the mixture with the [adventitious] defilements of the afflictive emotions—
Does not manifest the [inconceivable] deeds of a Conqueror in the three existences [of the Desire, Form, and Formless Realms].

Verse 108

Just as kernels of rice, buckwheat, and barley not removed from the husks and still with bristles
Do not serve as delicious food to be used by people [due to] not having been prepared well,
So the body [or essence] of a Lord of Doctrine which exists in sentient beings, but is unreleased from the covering of the afflictive emotions,
Does not afford the taste of the joy of doctrine for transmigrators beset by the covering of the afflictive emotions.

If we leave grains in their original state, i.e., inside the husk, we will not be able to eat

them. We have to remove the grains from their husk just as stated in Verse 108, “Just as kernels of rice, buckwheat, and barley not removed from the husks and still with bristles/ Do not serve as delicious food to be used by people [due to] not having been prepared well.”

Just as grains are hidden in the husk, likewise, the natural purity of the mind is obscured by the adventitious defilements. The Buddha liberates sentient beings by showing them the Dharma. Then sentient beings are able to free themselves from the obscurations.

What do you think is the meaning of Verse 107 c, d?

Verse 107 c, d

As long as it is not freed from the mixture with the [adventitious] defilements of the afflictive emotions—

Does not manifest the [inconceivable] deeds of a Conqueror in the three existences [of the Desire, Form, and Formless Realms].

Isn't this verse saying that as long as sentient beings are not freed from their afflictions, the buddhas do not work for them?

Khen Rinpoche: Isn't this verse saying that? What is the verse saying? This is what I am getting from this verse.

“As long as it is not freed”: What is “it” referring to?

“As long as it is not freed from the mixture with the [adventitious] defilements of the afflicted emotions—/ Does not manifest the [inconceivable] deeds of a Conqueror in the three existences ...”: What does “does not manifest” mean?

Student: It seems to be saying that as long as the tathagata essence is not free from “the mixture with the [adventitious] defilements of the afflictive emotions,” we cannot achieve, say, the wisdom truth body that can manifest deeds to help sentient beings in the three realms.

Khen Rinpoche: The “Conqueror” here is the basic constituent (tathagata essence) that is obscured by the adventitious defilements. As long as you are obscured by the adventitious defilements, you don't have the dharmakaya. As long as you don't have the dharmakaya, then you cannot work for sentient beings. As long as the dharmakaya is not actualised, as long as the mind is still obscured by the adventitious defilements, one cannot perform the deeds of a Conqueror.

Since the welfare of the sentient beings of the three realms cannot be fulfilled if the mind is still obscured with the adventitious defilements, as such, the buddhas turn the wheel of Dharma to help sentient beings to purify their obscurations. Here the faults of the obscurations are highlighted. Because of the obscurations, one cannot work for the welfare of sentient beings of the three realms. As such, there is a need to purify or remove those obscurations, the adventitious defilements.

4. *“Gold within filth”*

The fourth obscuration is the strong manifest afflictions of ignorance, anger and attachment. These are counted as one obscuration and linked with the next four verses.

Verse 109

Just as a person’s gold which had fallen into a place of rotten filth
When that person was going about [on the road],
Would remain for many hundreds of years
There as it was before due to having the attribute of
indestructibility,

Verse 110

And just as a god with the pure divine eye,
Having seen it there, says to someone,
“[Take out] this supremely precious gold that is here,
Cleanse it, and make something [such as a statue or ornament] that
is to be made from a precious substance,”

Verse 111

So the Subduer, having perceived the qualities [of the basic
constituent
Existing in] sentient beings, sunk in the afflictive emotions which
are like filth,
Makes fall the rain of excellent doctrine for all beings
In order to wash away the mud of the afflictive emotions.

Verse 112

Just as a god who has seen gold fallen into a place of rotten filth
Earnestly shows its supreme beauty to someone so that it is
thoroughly cleansed [of mud],
So the Conqueror, having perceived in sentient beings the precious
[essence of]
a perfect Buddha fallen in the great filth of the afflictive emotions
Teaches doctrine to embodied beings so that that [basic
constituent] is purified.

Here is an example of a person’s gold that had fallen into a pile of filth. The nature of the gold is such that even if it stays inside that pile of filth for hundreds of years, its nature does not change. Then imagine that there’s a worldly god or someone with a pure divine eye that sees that piece of gold in that pile of filth. He may tell someone, “There’s a piece of gold there. Take it out so you can make something good with it. Perhaps you can use that gold to make a statue of the Buddha”.

Here the pile of filth represents the three manifest mental poisons. The gold represents the tathagata essence. By turning the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha teaches the Dharma that helps sentient beings to manifest their potential by removing their adventitious defilements.

We are just going through the verses in this way. If you happen to see any words or phrases that you are not sure of, you can ask.

5. *“A treasury [of jewels] in the earth [under the house of the destitute]”*

The next three verses are related to the fifth obscuration, the level of the predispositions of ignorance.

Verse 113

Just as an inexhaustible treasure exists
Under the home of those destitute
But those persons do not know of it
And that treasure does not say to them, “I am here,”

Verse 114

So because of not realizing this which is like a treasure of jewels
inside the mind,
[Naturally] undefiled [and thus] having a nature [ultimately]
without
[Newly] establishing [qualities] and removing [faults that earlier
existed],
All these beings continuously undergo many forms of the suffering
of poverty.

Verse 115

Just as to a poor person under whose house a treasure of jewels is
concealed
That treasure of jewels does not say, “I am [here]”, and that person
does not know of it,
So the Sage is born in the world [and teaches doctrine] in order that
sentient beings, like poor persons,
In whose home of the mind the treasure of the [uncontaminated
element of a Superior’s] qualities resides, could attain it.

The analogy given here is of someone who is very poor, living in a house that happens to be sitting on something very precious, but he is not aware of this. If you are not aware, you will not tell other people that you have something precious. Also as you can see, the verse says, “The treasure of jewels does not say ‘I am [here]’.”

The treasure is an analogy for the treasure of jewels existing within the minds of sentient beings that is suitable to be transformed into a buddha. This treasure is referring to the tathagata essence, the mind’s emptiness of true existence that is by nature undefiled and naturally pure. It is not something that has come about newly or freshly through causes and conditions. It has always been like that.

As such, the tathagata essence is not freshly purified of a self because from the moment it existed, from time without beginning, it has always been devoid of a self. This is the explanation of Verse 114 b, c:

Verse 114 b, c

[Naturally] undefiled [and thus] having a nature [ultimately]
without
[Newly] establishing [qualities] and removing [faults that earlier
existed],

Because of not realising that one has this tathagata essence, one does not experience the bliss of liberation and one is always tormented by suffering.

A poor person obviously experiences poverty but poverty here is referring to the poverty of the bliss of nirvana. In that sense, one is poor. The Buddha eliminates this by turning the different wheels of Dharma.

You have to remember these nine examples and the nine obscurations. We are just listing them out here. They will become clearer in the future when we look at the reasons why certain examples are used. The examples in themselves are straightforward and easy to understand but obviously there must be a reason why each example is used to represent a particular obscuration.

In the example of the Buddha dwelling inside an ugly lotus, why is the obscuration of dormant attachment exemplified by the lotus? In the third example of the kernel of grain inside the husk, why is dormant ignorance (or bewilderment) exemplified by the husk? These will be explained in the near future.

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