

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 17

16 April 2015

Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 113—131. The nine examples that explain how the defilements are adventitious and the nine meanings that pertain to the class of the thoroughly afflicted phenomena. Discussion on the clear light nature of the mind from the conventional and ultimate points of view and from the viewpoint of the tenets. Verse 130: The nature of the mind is clear light but the defilements are adventitious. Verse 131: Listing of the nine obscurations.

In the last lesson, I said that in *The Tathagata Essence*, nine examples were taught to establish that the defilements are adventitious. Through that, one comes to understand that the nature of the mind is clear light.

In each of those nine examples, there is the object that is obscured and the obscuring factor. Likewise, when explaining the meaning of those nine examples, there is the explanation of what is obscured and what the obscuring factor is.

We went through the list of the nine meanings of the obscuring factors. These pertain to the nine obscurations that are 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.

ESTABLISHING THE OBSCURATIONS TO BE ADVENTITIOUS THROUGH THE NINE EXAMPLES			
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.

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

The fifth example pertains to the level of the predispositions of ignorance and is related to three verses, Verses 113 to 115, in the root text.

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.

In this example, there is a destitute person who is unaware that his house is sitting on a load of treasure. As such, he remains poor. Likewise, when applied to the meaning, although ordinary sentient beings like us possess the tathagata essence, we are not aware of this.

We possess this Dharma treasure within us that has always been with us and can help us achieve omniscience. This Dharma treasure makes it possible for us to experience every happiness. It is none other than the tathagata essence that is the mind's emptiness of true existence. This is the ultimate nature of the mind. This quality of the mind has always existed and is not freshly produced from causes and conditions. As such, this tathagata essence has no beginning.

Since we possess the tathagata essence, it can be activated. As such, the buddhas descend into various world systems like ours and turn the wheel of Dharma to enable us to activate our tathagata essence. In that sense, the dharmakaya acts as the empowering condition for the manifestation of the tathagata essence. But the main cause is that we have to work hard and put in the effort.

6. *"[The capacity of growing] stalks and so forth [existing] in a small seed"*

The path of seeing abandonments are exemplified by the next example that is related to the next three verses, Verses 116—118.

Verse 116

Just as a seed [capable of producing a tree] which exists in a fruit of
a mango tree and so forth—
[The seed being] undivertible [from giving rise to a sprout when it
meets with favorable conditions]—
Gradually turns into the phenomenon of a majestic tree,
Through the plowing of the ground, water, and so forth,

Verse 117

So the [uncontaminated] virtue which is the essential constituent of
the [Superior] qualities
Inside the covering of the skin of the fruit of ignorance and so forth
of sentient beings
Gradually becomes the phenomenon of a King of Subduers
In dependence upon this and that virtue [which is with the
essential constituent].

Verse 118

Just as a tree grows from within the skin covering a mango or
palmyra fruit
By way of the conditions of water, sunlight, air, earth, season, and
space,
So the sprout of the seed of a perfect Buddha contained inside the
fruit-skin of the afflictive emotions of sentient beings
Increases into [direct] perception of the [element of Superior]
qualities due to this and that virtuous condition [of the two

collections of merit and wisdom which serve as the causes of liberation].

Here, a seed that has the capacity of producing a tree is used as an example. When that seed is assisted by water, fertiliser and so forth, it will transform into a tree or plant.

The seed must have the capacity to produce a tree. Otherwise, even if the cooperative conditions like water, fertiliser and so forth are present, the seed will not be able to produce a tree. If the seed does not have the capacity to produce a tree, for example, a seed that is burnt or scorched by fire, then even meeting with the cooperative conditions for the production of a tree will not result in such a transformation.

The meaning is this: We have the tathagata essence that is by nature pure and virtuous but it is covered by ignorance. When the cooperative conditions of hearing, reflecting and meditating on the teachings come together, this allows the tathagata essence to manifest. By hearing, reflecting and meditating on the teachings, one can awaken the Mahayana lineage, enter the Mahayana path and gradually traverse the paths and grounds. In the end, one actualises the truth body, the dharmakaya. This is like the result of a seed that has been fully transformed into a tree.

7. *“The image of a Conqueror [made from precious substance] inside a tattered garment”*
The path of meditation abandonments are exemplified by the next example that goes with Verses 119—121.

Verse 119

Just as a god, having seen an image of the Conqueror
Made from a precious substance, wrapped in a tattered smelly
cloth,
And abiding on a road, speaks to someone about the fact of its
dwelling on the road
So that it could be released [from that tattered garment],

Verse 120

So [the Buddhas] endowed with the eye of unimpeded [perception
of all things]—
Having seen that the phenomena of a One Gone Thus, wrapped in
the [adventitious] afflictive emotions of various types,
[Exists] even in animals—teach methods likewise for the sake
Of freeing [the basic constituent].

Verse 121

Just as one with the divine eye, having seen the image of a One Gone
Thus that has the nature of a precious substance
Abiding on a road, wrapped in a smelly cloth, reveals this to
someone in order that it might be freed,
So, having perceived that the basic constituent dwelling on the road
of cyclic existence, bound in the tattered garment of the afflictive
emotions

[Exists] even in animals, the Conqueror teaches doctrine so that it might be freed [from obstructions].

This example seeks to show that the path of meditation abandonments are adventitious. Here is the example of a precious image of a buddha wrapped in a piece of tattered cloth. If the statue of the Buddha remains wrapped in that piece of tattered cloth, no one is going to see it. But someone, such as a worldly god, has the ability to see through the cloth and to point out to others that there is something inside it. Likewise, when applied to the meaning, the Omniscient One sees that the tathagata essence is temporarily being obscured by the afflictions. This tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, even in the continua of animals. The buddhas then teach or show the path of Dharma with the hope of liberating sentient beings.

8. *“A lord of humans [who is a Universal Monarch] inside the womb of a lowly woman”*
The obscurations of the impure grounds are exemplified by this example that goes with Verses 122—124.

Verse 122

Just as an ugly woman without protector,
Dwelling in a rest-house with no protector
But holding in her womb a glorious king,
Does not know that a lord of humans dwells in her belly [and thus
suffers the derision of others and so forth],

Verse 123

So being born in cyclic existence is like the dwelling-place without
protection [from various sufferings];
Impure sentient beings are like the woman endowed with a womb;
And the undefiled basic constituent is like [the king] dwelling in her
womb
As it is due to possession of this that is protection [from suffering].

Verse 124

Just as, although a lord of the earth dwells in the womb of a woman
wearing smelly clothing on her body and having an ugly form,
She undergoes supreme suffering in a protectorless dwelling-place,
So although there is a protector dwelling inside their own [minds],
transmigrators having a protectorless mind
Dwell in a state of suffering due to a mind made unpeaceful by the
power of the afflictive emotions.

The example here is of an ugly woman who is living alone and does not have anyone to protect her. She happens to be pregnant with an heir to a glorious king. When applied to the meaning, like this ugly woman, every afflicted sentient being born in cyclic existence possesses the tathagata essence but they are not aware that they possess it.

When this ugly woman, who does not have any protector, gives birth to a son who gradually grows up and becomes a wheel-turning king, she will be free of her

poverty. Likewise, when one's tathagata essence is activated, purified and refined, one finally achieves the dharmakaya and becomes a buddha and is then free of all problems. When one is liberated from or free of all the obscurations, one can be a saviour to others.

9. *"A precious [golden] image in an earthen mold"*

Next are the obscurations of the pure grounds. Even these are adventitious. This goes with Verses 125—127.

Verse 125

Just as having seen a statue [made from] melted gold inside [an earthen mold],
Of full [size with all features, its own entity being] quiescent of defilement [but] its outside having a nature of an earth [mold],
One who knows this removes the external obstruction
In order to cleanse the gold inside,

Verse 126

So having perceived that the defilements
Of the natural clear light are adventitious,
Transmigrators who are like [the earthen mold which is] the location of the precious substance
Are cleansed of defilements and become supremely enlightened.

Verse 127

Just as one skilled [in making statues]—knowing that a statue contained inside an earthen [mold]
Made from blazing undefiled gold has a nature of quiescence [since it is without defilement]—removes the earthen [mold],
So the omniscient [wisdom of the Buddha], knowing the quiescent mind like pure gold,
Removes the obstructions through exposition of the doctrines [which are methods for this] by means of accomplishing [the gentle pressure of] the stroke [that removes the earthen mold].

The example here is of a statue that is cast from molten gold but it is still inside the mould. If the statue is still inside the mould, we are not going to see it so we have to remove the mould in order to reveal the precious statue. Likewise, the buddhas perceive the defilements of the natural clear light mind are adventitious. Because of this, the buddhas teach sentient beings the methods to purify these obscurations and through that, their tathagata essence can manifest.

THE MIND IS IN THE NATURE OF CLEAR LIGHT

From the conventional and ultimate points of view

Here we talk about the mind that is in the nature of clear light. Generally speaking, what it means is that the nature of the mind is not polluted by defilements, i.e., the defilements do not abide in the nature of the mind. Besides explaining this from the usual ultimate point of view, I think you can also explain that the mind is in the nature of clear light from the conventional point of view.

When we talk about the mind, what exactly is it? What is its entity? It is that which is clear and knowing (or luminous and cognisant), and refers to that factor of experience that is able to cognise and be aware of any object that appears to it. It refers to its potential or ability to be aware of objects. That is, that which has the capacity to be aware of objects is termed consciousness or the mind. But this factor of clarity and awareness is not the ultimate nature of the mind.

The tantric presentation of the extremely subtle mind

If we were to explore this conventional nature of the mind from the tantric point of view, it offers a deeper explanation. The word 'mind' that is usually referred to in highest yoga tantra does not necessarily mean all kinds of minds. Most of the time, it is referring to the extremely subtle mind that is called the mind of clear light.

This extremely subtle mind doesn't have any beginning nor will it come to an end. This is the mind that goes on to enlightenment. This extremely subtle mind is the mind from the conventional point of view as explained in tantra.

The mind that moves from life to life is this extremely subtle mind. When this extremely subtle mind manifests, all the coarser levels of consciousnesses in our mind are not manifest as they have already dissolved. At the time of death, all the coarser levels of consciousnesses have dissolved and the culmination of that dissolution process is the extremely subtle mind.

So when one dies, one dies with this extremely subtle mind that moves on to the next rebirth and from life to life. This is what goes on as the continuum of this extremely subtle mind never ceases. If one is going to achieve enlightenment, the continuity of this extremely subtle mind transforms into the wisdom truth body. In other words, it is the substantial cause of the wisdom truth body.

In Buddhist tantra, we talk about the:

- basis clear light,
- path clear light
- resultant clear light

When we talk about the clear light on these three occasions, there are:

- the objective clear light
- the subjective clear light

So clear light can refer to the objective clear light and the subjective clear light. Basically this is referring to the object and the object possessor respectively. The objective clear light means that there is an object. The subjective clear light means that there is an object possessor, the mind.

For us ordinary beings, we possess the extremely subtle mind that manifests at the time of death. This is the clear light of the basis, specifically, the subjective clear light of the basis. The emptiness of this clear light mind that is one entity with the mind of clear light is the objective clear light.

When this extremely subtle mind of clear light is transformed into the entity of a path i.e., this extremely subtle mind has ascertained emptiness, then this is the path clear light and the subjective clear light. The object that is apprehended by this mind, emptiness, is the objective clear light on the occasion of the path.

When the extremely subtle mind transforms into the entity of the path—it has ascertained emptiness and has emptiness as its object—it is explained in the teachings that such a mind is very refined and subtle and is very powerful in removing the obscurations.

When all obscurations are finally removed by this extremely subtle mind realising emptiness, then this extremely subtle mind of the path becomes the dharmakaya that can be considered also from the subjective point of view and the objective point of view.

At the time of the result of the dharmakaya:

- There is the factor of natural purity that is the nature body (svabhavikakaya), which can be posited as the objective clear light.
- There is the wisdom truth body that is the subjective clear light.

	OBJECTIVE CLEAR LIGHT	SUBJECTIVE CLEAR LIGHT
Basis Clear Light	The emptiness of this clear light mind.	The extremely subtle mind that manifests at the time of death.
Path Clear Light	The object that is apprehended by this mind, emptiness.	The extremely subtle mind that has ascertained emptiness.
Resultant Clear Light	Factor of natural purity that is the nature body.	Wisdom truth body.

This is in response to a student's earlier question about the statement that the mind is in the nature of clear light. I guess you can talk about it from both the conventional and the ultimate points of view:

- The conventional nature of the mind can be termed as 'the mind is clear light'.
- The ultimate nature of the mind, i.e., its emptiness of true existence, can be termed as 'the mind is in the nature of clear light'.

When you look at the tantric explanation, when you look at the mind from the conventional and ultimate points of view, i.e., its conventional and ultimate nature, does it not make sense?

From the viewpoint of the tenets

But if you think about this from the perspective of the lower tenets—starting from the Autonomy Middle Way School (the Autonomists or Svatantrikas) and including the Mind Only School (the Cittamatrins)—all of them assert that the 'I' exists inherently and that there is something that one can point to as the 'I'. For them, the 'I' is imputed in dependence on the consciousness, which is the 'I' that they can point to.

Since all the tenets, with the exception of the Prasangikas, assert that anything that exists exists inherently, for them, the 'I' must exist inherently in that there is something that one can point to as the 'I' right there from its own side:

- For the Svatantrikas, they assert that it is the mental consciousness.

- For the proponents of the Mind Only School, it is the mind-basis-of-all. For them, the very thing that moves to enlightenment is the mental consciousness. It is the mind that moves to enlightenment and the mind that moves to enlightenment must be in the nature of clear light. (56.0)

Let us use an example. Generally speaking, children are innocent in that they tend to say whatever comes to their mind. They are straightforward in that way and don't have many discursive thoughts. Gradually, as the children grow up, their minds are filled with all kinds of concepts, thoughts, ideas and so forth. In that sense, their minds are obscured and they have lost their innocence. Just like the child, the mind that is in the nature of clear light gradually has obscurations heaped on it, obscuring its nature.

There are children who remember the experiences of their past lives especially when they are still very young, around one to two years old. The ability to remember their past lives also has to do with their living conditions; for instance, whether the children are kept physically clean and whether the type of foods that they are served is contaminated.

If conditions are such that the children are kept clean and their minds are still fresh and pure, they will be able to remember their past lives. However, when they grow up and reach the age of around ten to twelve, I don't think they are able to remember anything. In fact, they will forget everything as whatever they were able to remember before becomes non-existent. This happens because the mind is gradually being filled with and obscured by all kind of thoughts, ideas, concepts and so forth.

For the Svatantrikas and Cittamatrins—those who assert that the 'I' is the consciousness—it is the consciousness that moves from life to life and if there is improvement, then it is the consciousness that improves.

This is what I think from the perspective of those who assert that the 'I' is the mental consciousness or the mind-basis-of-all—it is that which has the ability to perceive object and is that which has the nature of clear light.

When it comes to the Prasangikas (proponents of the Consequence Middle Way School), to them, nothing exists inherently and if you were to search for the imputed object, it cannot be found. This includes the 'I' that cannot be found among its basis of designation. The mere 'I' is nothing more than that which is imputed upon—and you can say this—the emptiness of the mind.

The implication is that when you say that the mind is in the nature of clear light, that is none other than its emptiness of true existence or inherent existence. The consciousness exists in the nature of emptiness. It does not exist inherently but it does exist conventionally. You could say that the consciousness or any other phenomenon arises from the nature of emptiness. It is imputed as a consciousness because of its ability to cognise or be aware of objects.

I think perhaps this is what we can think about from the sutra perspective but the final explanation is the tantric explanation. From that point of view, you can then talk

about clear light and when you talk about clear light, there is the objective clear light and the subjective clear light.

- Verse 128 lists the examples of the objects that are obscured.
- Verse 129, starting from the lotus, swarm of bees and so forth, lists the obscuring factors given in the examples.
- Verse 130 states the meaning of the mind being in the nature of clear light but the defilements are adventitious.

Verse 130

The coverings of the afflictive emotions in the continuums of sentient beings,

Because of not being related [with the nature of the mind, are adventitious but have abided] beginninglessly [together with the element of a Superior's qualities.

However the undefiled nature of the mind

Is said to [have abided as the great pure nature without being polluted by those faults] beginninglessly.

The nature of the mind, the tathagata essence, is obscured by the adventitious defilements, but the adventitious defilements do not abide within the nature of the mind. Why is this so? Because the adventitious defilements themselves are by nature empty. This is something for us to think about.

We say that the tathagata essence of sentient beings has never been polluted. Its nature is clear light because it has not been polluted by the adventitious defilements. The defilements do not abide within the nature of the mind.

Why? Because the defilements have never resided in the nature of the mind and they have never polluted the nature of the mind. As such, the mind is in the nature of clear light and is by nature empty. Because of that, the defilements are said to be adventitious. As the defilements are adventitious, therefore all sentient beings are said to possess the tathagata essence.

Do you see this line of reasoning?

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*Question:* In the previous lesson you said that the mind apprehending inherent existence, ignorance, doesn't go on to enlightenment. My qualm is this: The nature of the mind is clear light. For example, when the defilements that are the seeds are activated, they give rise to the apprehensions of inherent existent. So ignorance is actually clear and knowing. If you say ignorance does not go on to enlightenment, then you would have to say that certain emptinesses of the mind are not the tathagata essence.

*Answer:* Ignorance doesn't go on to enlightenment nor does its emptiness that is one entity with that ignorance go on to enlightenment. We are not saying that the emptiness of ignorance is the tathagata essence. Who said that?

*Question:* Is ignorance a mind?

*Khen Rinpoche:* We would have to say yes.

*Question:* Isn't the emptiness of ignorance also a mind?

*Khen Rinpoche:* Are you getting from bad to worse?

*Question:* Are there not certain emptinesses of the mind that are not the tathagata essence?

*Answer:* Ignorance is an affliction that is an object of abandonment. It is abandoned by applying an antidote. As such, the continuum of ignorance is cut. Since the continuum of ignorance is severed before enlightenment, ignorance doesn't go on to enlightenment. If ignorance ceases, its emptiness that is one entity with it also ceases. It also doesn't go on to enlightenment. It is not the tathagata essence. Therefore, you can say that the ignorance's emptiness of true existence is not the tathagata essence.

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Verse 131 lists the nine obscurations.

Verse 131

The nine forms of defilements—(1-3) [the latencies or seeds of] desire, hatred, and obscuration [which are overcome by the exalted wisdom of a Superior], (4) the strong arousal [or manifestation] of those [three poisons], (5) The level of] the predispositions [of ignorance which are the means of achieving the uncontaminated actions and the mental body in the continuum of a Foe Destroyer and which are to be overcome by the exalted wisdom of the great enlightenment], (6) the objects to be abandoned by the path of seeing [which obstruct a common being from seeing reality], (7) the objects to be abandoned by the path of meditation [in the continuum of a Learner Superior], (8) The objects to be abandoned by the [seven] impure [grounds which are to be overcome by the pure grounds],

And (9) the defilements dependent on the pure grounds [which are to be overcome by the vajra-like meditative stabilization],

These nine defilements are exemplified by the nine examples of the obscuring factors. In this way, they seek to show that those nine defilements are adventitious.

Verse 132

Are indicated by [the nine] examples
Of the covering of a lotus and so forth,
But the divisions of coverings of afflictive emotions
Are beyond the limits of number.

If you were to expand on the afflictions to include the secondary afflictions and so forth, then they are endless.

In the root text itself, the nine defilements are merely enumerated but there is no discussion of what the nine really are. However, in the original commentary composed by Asanga to this *Uttaratantra*, there is quite an elaborate discussion of these nine defilements.

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*Question:* Why is the term, “clear light nature,” used instead of emptiness?

*Answer:* The dharmakaya encapsulates both the object and the object possessor (or subject). In general, the truth body, i.e., the dharmakaya or the embodiment of truth, is referring to the factor of natural purity that has been separated from the adventitious defilements. But if you think about what the term encapsulates, besides the object, the object being emptiness, you have to talk about the subject.

The dharmakaya works for sentient beings but does emptiness work for sentient beings?

(Inaudible response from student).

When we talk about the dharmakaya that works for sentient beings, it has to be the wisdom truth body. Is the wisdom truth body the truth body or not?

The dharmakaya is that factor of natural purity that has been separated from the adventitious defilements and its support, the wisdom truth body. They are separate or different natures. The main producer or the substantial cause for this must exist at the time of the path, during the time of being a sentient being.

From the general point of view, what is the substantial cause or the main producer of the wisdom truth body? It is the last moment of a sentient being; specifically, it is the uninterrupted path of the end of the continuum of a sentient being. That uninterrupted path at the end of the continuum of a sentient being directly realises emptiness. In the next moment, it becomes the wisdom truth body.

Anyway, if you were to say that the substantial cause, the main producer, of the wisdom truth body, is the wisdom that directly realizes emptiness, what is wrong with that? The wisdom directly perceiving emptiness is the substantial cause, the main producer of the wisdom truth body. Do you accept that?

Then let’s bring our attention to this mind—the uninterrupted path at the end of the continuum of a sentient being. Is that mind in the nature of clear light? Yes or no?

(Inaudible response from student).

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