

## **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.

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### **Lesson 18**

**21 April 2015**

Review of the verse from the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*. The object of the three times: the past, present and future. As it relates to the analogy of "a dream." As it relates to the discussion on karma: How do we account for the cessation of karma and the arising of its fruitional effect after a long interval. The disintegratedness of karma.

### **REVIEW OF 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 star"*

In the earlier discussion of the analogy of "a star," there was an explanation of the two levels of truth or reality:

1. There is a level of reality that appears to an unmistaken mind.
2. There is another level of reality that appears to a mistaken mind.

For objects that appear to, are established or posited by a mistaken mind, you have to understand that non-existents are included as well. Among the different kinds of mistaken consciousnesses, there is a category of mistaken consciousnesses that is a wrong consciousness. A wrong consciousness is a mind that engages erroneously with its object of the mode of apprehension. The apprehension of true existence is an example. The object of the mode of apprehension, the apprehension of true existence, is an example of a non-existent.

#### *"A visual aberration"*

Although true existence appears to this apprehension of true existence, does true

existence exist in reality as it appears? No, true existence does not exist whatsoever. Nevertheless, there is the appearance of true existence to this apprehension of true existence. That is why “a visual aberration” comes after a star. Although there have never been any truly existent phenomena, that is not the same as saying that phenomena are non-existent. While phenomena do *not* exist truly, phenomena *do* exist.

*“A flame of a lamp”*

What is an existent? An existent is that which appears to a conventional awareness (or mind), i.e., a phenomenon that is a mere appearance to or is posited by a conventional awareness. To highlight that phenomena are dependently arisen, there is the next example in the verse, “a flame of a lamp.”

Although this is the state of reality—it is how phenomena have always been and will always be—why do we suffer then in the first place? Why are we unhappy? Although phenomena have never and will never exist truly, due to our mind being polluted by the apprehension of true existence, we conceive that everything exists truly or inherently, as being established in and of themselves. Believing this in turn induces and gives rise to attachment and anger, leading to problems and suffering. Although in reality nothing exists truly and does not exist in the way it appears, nevertheless we conceive that anything that exists to exist truly.

*“An illusion”*

The next analogy, “an illusion,” illustrates this. An illusion is none other than a mere appearance to a mistaken mind. It does not exist in the way it appears. Nevertheless, an illusion looks real to the mistaken mind. This analogy highlights the fact that while things do not truly exist, nevertheless they *appear* to have an objective existence; they appear to exist truly.

This apprehension of true existence—conceiving phenomena to have an objective existence, existing inherently in and of itself—is the root of all confusion, all problems and everything that is undesirable. Samsara is the outcome.

*“A drop of dew, or a bubble”*

If we want to reduce our problems and our suffering, what is the method? The method is to reflect on impermanence and how everything that is associated with samsara is in the nature of suffering. As such, after “an illusion” comes “a drop of dew, or a bubble.” “A drop of dew” is the analogy for us to reflect on impermanence while the water bubble helps us to reflect on how anything that is associated with samsara is in the nature of suffering. These two reflections help us to reduce our suffering.

*“A dream, a flash of lightning, a cloud”*

These three analogies exemplify the supreme methods to overcome samsara.

True sufferings has four characteristics:

1. impermanent
2. suffering (or misery)
3. empty

#### 4. selfless

We reflect on the impermanent nature of suffering. Then we reflect on how cyclic existence is in the nature of suffering.

When we look at the third characteristic from the viewpoint of the Consequence Middle Way School (CMWS), 'empty' here refers to the emptiness of a self-sufficient person while the fourth characteristic, 'selfless', refers to subtle selflessness from the viewpoint of the CMWS.

Understanding the fourth characteristic, selfless, i.e., subtle selflessness, is the supreme method while the first three—impermanent, suffering, empty—prepares and moves one in the direction of that ultimate or highest solution, i.e., generating the wisdom realising selflessness. The wisdom realising selflessness is indispensable for eliminating the root of cyclic existence. Without the wisdom realising selflessness, the root of cyclic existence cannot be cut. If the root of cyclic existence cannot be cut, there is no way one can stop cyclic existence (or samsara). There is no way to achieve liberation.

It is mentioned in one sutra, "There is only one door to peace," i.e., there is only one door that leads to liberation. What is this door? It is the wisdom realising selflessness; specifically, the wisdom realising the emptiness of inherent existence.

It is said that the wisdom realising the emptiness of inherent existence is the sole antidote to samsara, the only door to liberation. You must establish in your own mind why this is so. It all boils down to what the root of samsara is. The root of samsara is not simply an erroneous mind. It is a conception of a self, the conception of true existence, the conception of inherent existence. Only the wisdom realising the emptiness of such a self, i.e., selflessness, and the emptiness of true existence that can act as a direct antidote against the apprehension of true existence. This is the reason why the wisdom realising selflessness is the only solution to samsara.

While the 'I' or person conventionally exists and is merely imputed, we have never conceived it in that way. We always believe that there is a real 'I' existing in and of itself and we cling on to that concept. Likewise, when we think of *our* mind, *our* consciousness, *our* thoughts, we conceive that our mind, consciousness and thoughts are real and truly existent, existing right there from their own side. Essentially, this conception of true existence is the root of all our problems because it gives rise to every single destructive emotion. Due to that, we accumulate karma. Samsara then follows. Therefore, the main solution is to realise that we ourselves, the 'I' or person, our mind, our consciousness and our thoughts do not exist inherently, do not exist truly.

When we talk about coming to an understanding or realisation that we, ourselves, and our minds do not exist truly, this is not an exercise in creating something fresh or new. It is not as if the mind has always been truly existent and we are trying to make it non-truly existent. That is not the case. Our mind, we ourselves and everything that exists have always been and will always be empty of existing truly. So when we say that we should come to an understanding and realisation that the 'I' or the mind is

empty of existing truly, it is to realise the way things have always been.

When we have some understanding of the emptiness of true existence—how we ourselves do not exist in the way we believe we exist and how the mind does not exist in the way we believe it exists—only then will the statements, “The mind is in the nature of clear light” and “The defilements are adventitious” start to make a little bit of sense. So firstly, before we can even talk about the tathagata essence, we really must have some understanding of emptiness—that everything that exists has the nature of emptiness.

*The object of the three times: the past, the present and the future*

When we consider the emptiness of any object, we can classify the existence of the object of our inquiry into the object that existed in the past, the object of the present and the object of the future. Whether it is the object of the past, the object of the present or the object of the future, we bring them and their empty nature to mind, i.e., all of them do not exist truly.

~ “A dream”

Perhaps the analogy of “a dream” from the verse in the *Vajra Cutter Sutra* is to help us understand how the very entity or nature of the past itself is empty of existing truly—the very concept of a past and that which exists in the past do not exist in and of themselves.

In a dream, we experience a variety of objects and there could be appearances of all kinds of things. In a dream, there could be something very attractive and very pleasant or it could be a nightmare where we see very unpleasant and frightening things. If we remember our dream when we wake up and it happens to be a good dream, sometimes we can even feel attached to the object or the experience of the dream. We feel good about it. However, if it was a nightmare, by recalling what had happened in the dream, fear arises even when we are awake.

Everything we experienced or that had happened in the dream is not real. Yet when we are awake, we still cling on to that dream experience if it was a good dream or generate fear if it had been a terrible experience. The dream experience is over when we are awake. The object in our dream is no longer there but we can still be attached to or be fearful of it, clinging on to the dream experience.

Likewise, while things that existed in the past no longer exist, nevertheless we can be attached to or have aversion for them still. The things that existed in the past do not exist truly and have never existed truly but we still conceive them to have an objective existence. Because we conceive them to be truly existent, that leads to clinging and attachment.

When we talk about the three times—the past, present and future—most Buddhist tenets assert that the past and the future are permanent. But the CMWS asserts that the three times—the past, present and future—are functioning things and are impermanent.

*~ Discussing karma*

This brings us to the discussion of karma. It is said clearly in the teachings that the results of karma will never go to waste. One of the characteristics of karma is that if an action is created, its result will not perish on its own. Buddha himself said so. This is a core belief and assertion of all Buddhist tenets in that:

- all actions never go to waste.
- all actions will definitely produce results.

If the result of an action will not perish on its own, that means it is certain that once an action (or karma) is accumulated, it will definitely produce a result. It is only a matter of time.

It is said in the teachings that there can be many intervening eons, i.e., a very long period of time, from the time the karma ceases to the time it brings forth its result. How then do we account for an action producing an effect so far down the road? This is an important question and all the different Buddhist tenets have their own explanations to account for this non-wastage of the karma created.

Once you initiate the karma, whether it is virtuous or non-virtuous, if it exists continuously and maintains its own momentum without ceasing, that will mean it is permanent and eternal. How then will it ever give rise to its result? Once an action is created, if it is not subject to change and remains the same, this is akin to saying that it is permanent and unchanging. How can something that is permanent and unchanging produce an effect that is supposedly the result of that karma? That is the problem.

If you were to take the position that when karma is accumulated, it disintegrates and ceases in the next moment, then from the second moment, its disintegratedness has set in. From that moment to the time its effect issues forth from that karma, there is this huge gap of time again. If it has ceased in the second moment, what is happening in the interval between the disintegration of that action to the time it issues forth its effect? If you were to say it is unchanging and static, once again you have the same problem— how can you experience the effect?

You have to focus, listen and then think about this. Do you get what we are trying to figure out here?

Everybody accepts that if you create and accumulate karma, you have to experience its effect. It does not matter how long the intervening period may be. It can be a very long time, eons and eons, but the point here is that there will come a time when you have to experience the effect. How do you account for that? How do you connect the karma to its effect?

If you were to say that once you start creating the karma, it continues and does not cease, that means the karma does not change and is static. If it is static, even if you assert that it continues, there is no way you can assert how it can produce an effect because a permanent phenomenon cannot produce an effect, permanence being non-momentary.

If you say that once you create karma, it ceases in the next moment, i.e., it becomes

non-existent in the second moment, again how do you account for that karma giving rise to an effect?

~ *The assertions of the four tenets*

Anyway, back to the original point. How do you account for karma giving rise to an effect sometime in the future? The four Buddhist tenets have their own assertions that try to offer a coherent explanation for this.

According to the Great Exposition School (GES), the Vaibashikas, there is what they call the factor of non-wastage. This factor of non-wastage is a non-associated compositional factor that is not the karma itself but this factor guarantees that the effect will be experienced. The example given by the GES is that of an IOU slip, i.e. when you borrow money from someone, you issue an IOU to the person who loaned you the money as a guarantee that the loan will be repaid.

The proponents of the Mind Only School (MOS) assert that there is a mind-basis-of-all. The first moment the karma is produced, it is approaching its disintegration. During the time when the karma is disintegrating, this phase is called the karma approaching disintegration and an imprint or impression of that karma is left on the mind-basis-of-all. At a later time, when the imprint of that particular karma is activated, then one experiences the fruitional or ripening effect of that karma.

The proponents of the Sutra School (SS) and the Middle Way Autonomists (MWAS) assert that an imprint of the karma is left on the mental consciousness. At a later time when the conditions are ripe, the karma activates and you experience the effect. For the SS and the MWAS, the basis of infusion of the karmic seeds is the mental consciousness.

As many of you are already aware, the GES, SS, MOS and the MWAS are the same in asserting that most if not all phenomena exist by way of their own character. However, from the highest school point of view, this is akin to saying that everything exists inherently.

So for the GES, SS, MOS and MWAS, when karma is accumulated, it disintegrates and ceases. For them, the disintegratedness of karma is a permanent phenomenon. As such, it is non-momentary. Because the disintegratedness of karma is permanent, it cannot give rise to an effect. That is a problem. Therefore, they resort generally to the concept of imprints as they have to account for the connection of the end of karma and the experiencing of its effect.

On the other hand, the Middle Way Consequentialists (the Prasangikas or the proponents of the Consequence Middle Way School) say that there is no need for such complicated theories such as imprints or the mind-basis-of-all in order to present a coherent explanation. They assert that in fact the disintegratedness of karma is merely imputed by thought and it does not exist by way of its own character. Therefore, it can give rise to effects since the disintegratedness of karma does not exist inherently, i.e., there is no inherently existent disintegratedness. This is because disintegration happens due to causes and conditions.

Production does not exist inherently, i.e., there is no inherently existent production because production is due to causes and conditions. Likewise, there is no inherently existent disintegration because disintegration happens due to causes and conditions.

The CMWS asserts that disintegratedness, the ‘pastness’ of the karma, is a composite (or composed) phenomenon and is impermanent. It does not exist inherently because disintegratedness is a result of causes and conditions.

According to the CMWS, a vase’s disintegratedness (or karma’s disintegratedness)—the pastness of a vase (or the pastness of karma)—is a composite phenomenon because it is produced from causes and conditions. The disintegratedness of a vase (or disintegratedness of karma) is an affirming negative.

Phenomena can be divided into positive and negative phenomena. There are two kinds of negative phenomena:

1. the non-affirming (or non-implicative) negative
2. the affirming (or implicative) negative

Now we are just planting imprints! Perhaps after some time you will understand what is being said.

*Question:* What does the disintegratedness of the vase affirm? I understand that a non-affirming negative means that it does not affirm anything.

*Answer:* Think of how your mind arrives at the understanding of the disintegratedness of the vase. The vase’s disintegratedness is the pastness of the vase. It happens after the vase has disintegrated.

How do you come to understand that? It is based on negation. The vase is disintegrating. The vase is becoming non-existent. Based on that, you then come to have an idea of the pastness of the vase, i.e., the disintegratedness of the vase.

In order to conceive the vase’s disintegratedness, that comes about due to the vase disintegrating. The vase has to cease to exist in order to have the vase’s disintegratedness. Isn’t a negation taking place? The vase’s disintegratedness can only come about through the disintegration of the vase, i.e., it ceasing to exist. It is becoming non-existent.

Then think about the vase’s disintegratedness. What is implied here? That disintegratedness of the vase happens due to certain causes and conditions. The point here is that the word ‘disintegratedness’ implies that it is due to causes and conditions.

*Question:* The CMWS says that the disintegratedness of karma is a composite phenomenon. How then do they account for the long interval between the accumulation of that karma and its effect? The other schools account for this through the concept of imprints.

*Answer:* The CMWS are not against nor do they reject the idea of imprints. There are

imprints. The context of our discussion here is examining what connects the end of a karma to its results. The other tenets have to be creative and came out with the idea of karmic imprints being stored somewhere. All of them, except the CMWS, believe that everything that exist must exist by way of their own character. There must be something findable and inherently existent, right there from its own side. So they came out with concepts such as the factor of non-wastage and the basis of infusion for the karmic imprints to be the mind-basis-of-all or the mental consciousness.

But the CMWS says, “There is no need to make things so complicated. Just look at karma itself. When karma is accumulated, it disintegrates. The disintegratedness or the past of this karma does not exist inherently because disintegratedness is a composite phenomenon arising from causes and conditions.

Since the disintegratedness of karma is a composite phenomenon, that disintegratedness will produce its own effect—the next moment of disintegratedness, i.e., the disintegratedness of disintegratedness. The next moment of disintegratedness will produce the next moment of disintegratedness and so forth. This is because disintegratedness is a composite phenomenon. Therefore, it is impermanent and produces its own effect in the next moment. This is how you connect the disintegration of karma to the time when its result is experienced. There is this continuum of disintegratedness.”

This is a difficult point. Nevertheless, it has been so asserted by the saviour, Nagarjuna and the glorious Chandrakirti.

*Question:* Can I cite an example to clarify this point? For example, a mango seed is produced. At that moment, the disintegratedness of the mango seed starts. You can keep the seed for years until the time when it meets the conditions of water, sun and so forth. It sprouts into a mango plant. During all that time, the disintegratedness of the mango seed is occurring. That is, the mango seed is existing but it is disintegrating all the way from the moment it is produced until it becomes a plant many years later. Is that what you mean?

*Answer:* During the time when the seed exists, production, disintegration and abeyance are occurring simultaneously. What is the problem?

*Student:* The disintegratedness of that seed is occurring throughout those times because as you say it is a composite phenomenon. It is the same with karma. I am trying to account for how this disintegratedness of the seed or our karma can cause the effect to occur so many years after its production. Is what I said about the mango seed correct? If it is, then that's fine.

*Khen Rinpoche:* I don't know ...

We can also talk about whether karma's disintegratedness is virtuous or non-virtuous. The disintegratedness of virtuous karma is virtuous. This also applies to the disintegratedness of non-virtuous karma.

If you look at the difference between the CMWS and the other Buddhist tenets, the



other Buddhist tenets do not know how to posit disintegratedness as a composite phenomenon. They all posit that disintegratedness is a permanent phenomenon, i.e., a non-composite phenomenon. The CMWS on the other hand posits that disintegratedness—the pastness of a vase or the pastness of karma—is a composite phenomenon and is impermanent. Therefore, it can produce its own effect, i.e., the disintegratedness of disintegratedness. What accounts for this difference boils down to whether one asserts that things exist by way of their own character or not.

- The CMWS asserts that everything that exists does not exist truly and does not exist inherently.
- As such, there is no inherently existent disintegratedness.
- Why is disintegratedness not inherently existent? Because it is a phenomenon that is dependent on causes and conditions.
- If it is dependent on causes and conditions, then it is a composite phenomenon and is impermanent.

For the CMWS, when they look at the pastness of a vase, the disintegratedness of the vase, that can only come about when the vase ceases to exist—it has disintegrated. As such, you can talk about the disintegratedness of the vase.

While it is a composite phenomenon, if you were to look for that composite phenomenon in that factor of disintegratedness, it is neither one with nor different from the factor of disintegratedness. Basically, there is no inherently existent disintegratedness. There is no inherently existent composite phenomenon either. They are merely imputed just as everything else is merely imputed. So yes, it is a composite phenomenon but it is merely imputed by thought.

The CMWS answers this fundamental question by asserting that when an action, karma, disintegrates and ceases, the next moment of disintegratedness is produced. Thus it is a composite phenomenon. As such, it produces its own effect—the next moment of disintegratedness. That moment of disintegratedness produces its own next moment of disintegratedness and so forth. So there is this continuum of disintegratedness that links and connects the end of action (karma) to the time when the ripening effects of that karma is experienced.

This is a difficult point. If you think about it, it is really challenging for us to conceive how this continuum of disintegratedness can bring forth a fruitional effect. In theory, it sounds good but then even the theory is difficult. Even if you were to get something out of this theory—that disintegratedness produces the next moment of disintegratedness that in turn produces the next moment of disintegratedness and for however long it takes, there will come a time when the effect is produced—when we think again about the fruitional effects of the karma such as rebirth or some painful experience, that production seems real, does it not? There is this arising of a *real* fruitional effect.

When we think about imprints and try to explain how we experience things due to the ripening of certain imprints, it is easier for the mind to conceive this. But when we try to think of how this continuum of disintegratedness can then bring forth a fruitional effect, it is difficult for us to conceive this.

I guess all these problems arise because we do not have the experiential knowledge of what inherent existence is. We cannot even identify properly what the object of negation is. We cannot differentiate between inherent existence and existence itself.

There is scriptural proof for the CMWS' assertion that disintegratedness is a composite phenomenon. In the *Sutra of the Ten Grounds*, there is a quotation that says, "Aging and death are produced by the condition of birth."

What is death? When we refer to death, the person has already died. The dying is done. The person is dead. So the person doesn't exist. That is said to be a result of birth. If death is produced by birth, then what produces disintegratedness? It is the same line of reasoning.

Nagarjuna gave another example. When we talk about the extinguishing of the flame of a butter lamp, it is produced by the exhaustion of the wick and the butter. They are used up. Likewise, there are people who die due to lack of food or medicine. Because of the lack of food or medicine, death occurs. The phenomenon in question is the lack of food or lack of medicine. This example helps us understand that disintegratedness is a functioning thing. It is produced and is a composite phenomenon.

The CMWS is saying that disintegratedness is a produced or composite phenomenon. When the karma is accumulated, it doesn't have to last for a long time. Being a momentary phenomenon, it is disintegrating all the time. So in the very next moment, it has disintegrated and already ceased to exist. That next moment is the disintegratedness of karma. Because that disintegratedness is a composite phenomenon, it is produced from causes and conditions and it necessarily produces its own effect. That produces the next moment of disintegratedness and so on. There is a continuum of disintegratedness. All of them are functioning things.

However, this does not mean that the CMWS does not talk about imprints. The CMWS talks about imprints as well. If you talk about imprints, there must be something holding those imprints. That is called the basis of infusion. Most of the tenets talk about the basis of infusion in terms of the mind or consciousness such as the mind-basis-of-all or the mental consciousness. But the CMWS has their own take as to what is the basis of infusion of such imprints.

According to the CMWS, the basis of infusion of the imprints is the mere 'I'. The imprints are left on the mere 'I' that becomes the repository for the imprints.

This is difficult. The main problem is because we are clinging on to true existence and inherent existence and we cannot accept that.

According to the CMWS, as cited in Chandrakirti's auto-commentary to his own *Supplement to the Treatise on the Middle*, there are two bases of infusion:

1. The temporal basis of infusion is the consciousness.
2. The actual basis of infusion that exists throughout all time is the mere 'I'.

*Khen Rinpoche: Sorry. We went off in a different direction today.*

For the CMWS, the past is a functioning thing. If you get the idea that the past is a functioning thing and not a permanent phenomenon, then the mission has been accomplished!

*Question:* You talked about the past being a functioning thing. In that case, there should be a future that is also a functioning thing, just as with disintegratedness, there will also be the production of a phenomenon. Otherwise, the phenomenon will keep on disintegrating and will never produce a final result. So if there is a pastness, there should also be a futureness?

Technically, a phenomenon has both a disintegratedness and producedness to another phenomenon because there is both a pastness and a futureness of the next moment.

*Khen Rinpoche:* I don't understand your question. Sorry, there's no time.

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Patricia Lee & Julia Koh; edited by Cecilia Tsong.