

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

Lesson 25

23 June 2015

Awakening the lineage. Manifestation of the tathagata essence. Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 154—158: The person who realises the tathagata essence. Sharing by a student.

AWAKENING THE LINEAGE

I have mentioned that in order for us to awaken the lineage, we have to focus on two things:

- We have to engage in hearing, reflection and meditation.
- We need to work hard at accumulating merit and purifying the mind of negativities and obscurations.

In order to be able to do a good practice of accumulating merit and purifying the mind of obscurations and negativities, we need to have a good practice of going for refuge to the Three Jewels. If we have good refuge in our heart, then the practices of accumulating merit and purifying the mind of obscurations and negativities will be done well. This means we need to have faith in and devotion to the Three Jewels.

Many different kinds of faith can be engendered in our mind. Here we are talking about the faith that comes from understanding and believing in the qualities of the Three Jewels. If we have faith in and devotion to the Three Jewels that come from knowing what their qualities are, then we will also be able to develop trust and faith in the workings of karma and its effects.

With a strong conviction in the workings of karma and its effects, we will be able to undertake the proper practice of abandoning what needs to be abandoned and cultivating what needs to be cultivated. When we are able practise this well, naturally all the worries, fears, frustrations and discursive thoughts that are associated with

the attachment to the happiness of this life alone will naturally weaken and subside. This will in turn give us the mental space to really think about where we will be reborn in our next life. We will gradually develop a sincere wish and interest in having a good rebirth. Only then can we say that our Dharma practice has started. The beginning of our Dharma practice is like the entry level to the process of awakening the lineage in ourselves.

It all comes back to our practice of refuge. If one has proper refuge, the thought of practising Dharma will arise in the mind. The various practices of a person of small capacity are the methods to help us develop a good practice of refuge. Then our Dharma practice can start and we can begin to awaken our lineage.

But after reflecting on and generating an experience of all these points, much remains to be done. On the basis of the practices mentioned above, then we can think of the various problems and sufferings of cyclic existence. We must recall again and again the problems of being in samsara, the general problems and sufferings and the specific sufferings of the various realms. Then we can come to an understanding that any existence within the three realms of cyclic existence is in the nature of suffering.

We also have to reflect on and understand the benefits of freedom from cyclic existence, i.e., the benefits of being liberated from cyclic existence. These points would help us to develop a yearning to achieve liberation.

Through the sustained reflection on the faults of cyclic existence and the benefits of achieving liberation from cyclic existence, having thought about these topics well, signs will manifest. Feeling that samsara is suffering and yearning to be free from samsara, strong emotions may arise. One may cry or one's bodily hairs may stand on end. Such signs could mean that one is beginning to awaken the Hinayana lineage.

When people who engage in sustained reflection generate a feeling for the emptiness of inherent existence, enlightenment, or the wish to develop the paths and grounds and so forth, these could be special signs indicating the awakening of their Mahayana lineage.

The awakening of the lineage has to lead that individual into the path.

- For a person who is awakening her Hinayana lineage, the awakening of that lineage should lead her into the Hinayana path, closer to liberation.
- Likewise, for a person who is awakening her Mahayana lineage, that awakening of the Mahayana lineage should bring her closer into entering the Mahayana path and thus closer to enlightenment.

The Hinayana scriptures are taught for the person who has awakened the Hinayana lineage to enable him to move towards and achieve liberation. Likewise, the Mahayana scriptural collections are taught to those who have awakened their Mahayana lineage in order to help them enter the path and traverse the paths and grounds with the intention to lead them towards enlightenment.

For a person who is of definite Hinayana lineage, if he has awakened his Hinayana lineage, then one has to guide him by showing him the Hinayana scriptural collection

of teachings and lead him to the Hinayana path towards liberation. For such a person, if one was to show him the Mahayana teachings, it is said that they will only become an obstacle for him. It is said that showing him the Mahayana teachings will actually make him take a much longer time to achieve enlightenment.

For the person of definite Hinayana lineage, even if he was shown the Mahayana teachings and he managed to generate bodhicitta, it is said that his bodhicitta will degenerate and this becomes an obstacle for him to achieve enlightenment. So the way to help the person of definite Hinayana lineage achieve enlightenment in the long run is to show him the Hinayana path for the time being and help him enter the Hinayana path.

As can be seen from our discussions so far, until we develop a real yearning for a good rebirth, it is extremely difficult for our activities to become Dharma practice. As we have seen, the entry-level meaning of awakening the lineage can be taken to mean developing a real yearning from the heart to have good rebirths in the future.

When you look at the treatises, you will find terms like, “awakening the Hinayana lineage” and “the awakening of the Mahayana lineage.” That is it. They don’t talk about awakening the lineage in the sense of developing a yearning for a good rebirth. But I guess by extrapolating from what is usually said, one can say that the minimum entry level of awakening the lineage is developing an interest in the happiness beyond this life.

If one awakens the lineage of practising the Dharma—if that is really awakened—one’s yearning for good rebirths and one’s yearning for the happiness of future lives will become very stable and unshakeable. When one’s yearning for good rebirths is very stable, that becomes the basis for one’s joyous effort in achieving good rebirths. That joyous effort will increase more and more. It is said that with a stable heartfelt yearning—when one really cares about the happiness of one’s future lives—that will become a foundation for one’s effort to achieve that goal to increase more and more.

With that kind of effort, one prioritises Dharma practice above everything else. One prioritises Dharma practice to achieve good rebirths to be one’s main mission in life. When we are able to reach that level, then the expression, ‘to be free from the lower realms’ carries some real meaning and is really achievable.

Likewise, when someone who has awakened the Hinayana lineage is able to develop a very stable yearning for liberation from cyclic existence, that becomes the basis for his effort to increase more and more. It becomes possible for him to prioritise the achievement of liberation above everything else, focussing on just that goal. When that happens, then he will quickly be liberated from samsara.

It is the same for those who have awakened the Mahayana lineage. They will develop a very strong yearning for full enlightenment. With that strong and stable yearning for full enlightenment, that will lead to an increase in their effort. They will prioritise the achievement of enlightenment above everything else, making it their main mission in life. The result then comes quickly.

The buddha lineage consists of two lineages:

1. the naturally abiding lineage in dependence on which one achieves the nature body at the end of the path.
2. the developmental lineage in dependence on which one achieves the form bodies—the complete enjoyment body and the emanation body—at the end of the path.

Practices of the three types of persons

In the stages of the path to enlightenment, we talked about the three types of persons:

1. The person of small capacity
2. The person of middling capacity
3. The person of great capacity

If you examine all the practices of a person of small capacity, essentially they help the individual to develop a sincere and genuine interest in practising the Dharma, i.e., they awaken the lineage for practising the Dharma. This means that all the practices are done initially to help the individual to start thinking in this way, “The Dharma is something I need to do. I need to practise the Dharma.”

In order to develop such a thought from the heart—“The Dharma matters. I must practise it.”—one has to meditate on the various levels of practices that are taught for a person of small capacity. One should do them gradually in stages. Without going through those stages, without thinking about them, it becomes extremely difficult to develop the genuine thought of practising real Dharma.

If we don’t eliminate our preoccupation with the happiness of this life, our attachment to this life, and we don’t develop a real yearning from the heart for the happiness of our future lives, it is very difficult to have the real wish to practise the Dharma.

The practices for a person of medium capacity essentially are to help her awaken the Hinayana lineage and to lead her into the path towards liberation.

Likewise, the practices for person of great capacity are meant to awaken the Mahayana lineage and then lead her into the Mahayana path and towards full enlightenment.

Why the lineage can be awakened

All sentient beings can develop the thought to practise the Dharma. We can call this awakening the lineage of practicing the Dharma. If such a lineage can be awakened, it follows that such a lineage must exist already in all sentient beings, because without the lineage in the first place, one can’t awaken it. That is the point.

The fundamental essential point is that our mind is empty of existing truly. The mind has never existed inherently. Because it does not exist inherently, when favourable conditions and positive causes are put in place, positive change can happen. If the mind has always been inherently existent, it won’t matter what kind of positive conditions are encountered. Change can never happen. Precisely because positive changes do happen when we put in place the correct positive causes and conditions,

this shows that the most fundamental nature of the mind is its emptiness of existing inherently. As such, the mind's emptiness of true existence is posited to be buddha nature, the lineage or the tathagata essence.

Because the mind is dependently arisen (or dependently originated), it is empty of existing inherently. If the mind is not dependently arisen, it would mean that the mind exists in and of itself. If that is the case, then there is nothing we can do with the mind for it will never change.

Although the mind is accompanied by defilements (or afflictions), the defilements themselves are also dependently arisen. As such, if the causes and conditions for the arising of the defilements are removed, they cease to exist and they will not arise. Because the defilements do not exist inherently, therefore the mind can be separated from the defilements.

- The mind does not exist inherently. The mind is dependently arisen.
- The defilements do not exist inherently. They are dependently arisen.
- As such, if one meets with the correct positive causes and conditions, the defilements can be removed.

The defilements are likened to the clouds that move temporarily across the sky. The sky is likened to the tathagata essence, the mind's emptiness of true existence. When the conditions come together for the clouds to dissipate, the clouds will dissipate. Then what is revealed is the sky itself. You see the clear blue sky clearly.

Likewise, with the gathering of proper causes and conditions, when the defilements are removed, what is revealed is the fundamental nature of the mind, the mind's emptiness of true existence. When the defilements are removed, that basic nature of the mind is no longer accompanied by defilements. What we have is the mind's emptiness of true existence; in this case, a buddha's mind emptiness of true existence. The buddha that we can become is not to be found somewhere outside. When the mind is accompanied by defilements, we are not a buddha, but when the defilements are removed, what is revealed is the fundamental purity of the mind, the mind's emptiness of true existence. That is buddhahood. There is no need to point to anything else; that is buddhahood.

As such, these are the ways to think about the lineage, the tathagata essence and how the defilements are adventitious. When we talk about the tathagata essence, this is the very essence. If we understand this, that is it.

Khen Rinpoche: So it is not so difficult. You can understand with just two sentences!

MANIFESTATION OF THE TATHAGATA ESSENCE

Question: Is the 'manifestation' of the buddha lineage the same as the 'awakening' of the buddha lineage or does one have a bigger pervasion? For example, without the three activities of hearing, reflection and meditation, an animal gives rise to a virtuous thought such as the compassion to protect its young, would that be considered some kind of manifestation of the lineage?

Answer: I have explained earlier what the awakening of the lineage is.

As for the manifestation of the lineage, when it is fully manifest, it is no longer called the lineage. When the lineage is fully transformed at the time of enlightenment, it is called the nature body. It is no longer called the lineage, the tathagata essence. I guess this is what we can say. When the tathagata essence is fully manifest, it becomes the nature body. We don't call the nature body the tathagata essence anymore as it is not the lineage anymore.

Earlier on, we talked about the different kinds of defilements such as the path of seeing abandonments and the path of meditation abandonments. When one achieves the uninterrupted path that is the antidote to the path of seeing abandonments, then one achieves the path of release of the path of seeing. Perhaps we can say that one achieves the manifestation of the tathagata essence that is the abandonment of the path of seeing abandonments. When one achieves the path of release of the path of seeing, one has achieved the cessation of the path of seeing abandonments.

When one becomes a foe destroyer, one has abandoned all the afflictions and one achieves a true cessation, i.e., an abandonment of the afflictions. I guess you can call the true cessation that is the abandonment of the afflictions to be a manifestation of the tathagata essence that is an abandonment of the afflictions. Likewise, when one has achieved the abandonment of the path of seeing abandonments, a true cessation, you can call that a manifestation of the tathagata essence, which is an abandonment of the path of seeing abandonments.

This is debatable and is something for us to think about. For example, the true cessation that is achieved by the foe destroyers is the abandonment of the afflictive obscurations. Can we call that abandonment a manifestation of the tathagata essence that is an abandonment of the afflictive obscurations?

When you debate, you can debate about the choice of words. For example, you can argue that the true cessation that is achieved by foe destroyer is a manifestation of the tathagata essence that is an abandonment of the afflictive obscurations but it is not a manifestation of the tathagata essence because you can stick to your original thesis, the starting point of the debate. Your thesis is something that you can never give up. Earlier on, we said that the manifestation of the tathagata essence only happens when you have achieved the nature body, i.e., when the nature body is actualised. That is the fundamental position you start with. Anyway, if you want debate, this is how you go about it.

Khen Rinpoche: Anyway, we have no time to debate.

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## **THE PERSON WHO REALISES THE TATHAGATA ESSENCE**

Verse 154

The ultimate [essence] of self-arisen [Buddhas, spontaneous and un compounded]

Is to be realized through just faith [by common beings, Hearers, Solitary Realizers, and Bodhisattvas who have newly entered their vehicle and is not realized by them just as it is. For example] the blazing light of the disc of the sun Is not seen by the eyeless.

It is said that ordinary beings who have not entered the paths and even those beings who have entered the paths, such as the hearers, solitary realisers and the ordinary bodhisattvas, do not realise the tathagata essence.

- The ordinary beings who have not entered the paths do not realise the tathagata essence because they hold on to the 'I' and 'mine' very strongly. They do not realise emptiness.
- The hearers and solitary realisers have not realised the emptiness of true existence because they only realise the coarse selflessness of persons so they also do not realise the tathagata essence.
- Then there are some bodhisattvas who have entered the path but have yet to realise emptiness. These bodhisattvas also do not realise the tathagata essence.

The last two lines of verse 154—"the blazing light of the disc of the sun/ Is not seen by the eyeless"—I am not exactly sure what that means. Perhaps it is saying that the tathagata essence is not realised by these four types of persons who are ordinary beings. These four specific types of ordinary beings do not realise the tathagata essence. However, this is not the same as saying that an ordinary being necessarily will not realise emptiness or the tathagata essence. That is not the case.

#### Verse 155

This [basic constituent of the pure nature] has no [previously existent faults of afflictive emotions] to be removed, And not the least [factor of good qualities] to be [newly] established.

The reality [which is the mode of subsistence devoid of superimposition and deprecation] is to be viewed as reality [by means of the ultimate wisdom].

When [upon developing familiarity with meditative equipoise] reality is seen [just as it is], there is release [from the two obstructions].

"This [basic constituent of the pure nature] has no [previously existent faults of afflictive emotions] to be removed, /And not the least [factor of good qualities] to be [newly] established": The first two lines is delineating the mode of abiding of the basis. "This [basic constituent of the pure nature]": The basic constituent is naturally pure and has never been truly existent in that it has never been an object grasped by the apprehension of true existence. As such, this basic constituent "has no [previously existent faults of afflictive emotions] to be removed" because its true existence has never existed in the first place.

The basic constituent has been naturally pure from the time it existed. There is nothing to be removed, i.e., there are no defilements to be removed from the beginning because it has always been pure from the beginning. The emptiness of a

truly existent person or phenomenon, or the selflessness of persons and phenomena, is not newly created or newly established. The persons and all other phenomena have always been devoid of a self since beginningless time. This has been their nature from the very beginning.

The object believed by ignorance, i.e., the object grasped at by the apprehension of true existence, has never existed. It has always been empty. That is why we talk about the emptiness of true existence. This emptiness is the ultimate truth.

“When [upon developing familiarity with meditative equipoise] reality is seen [just as it is], there is release [from the two obstructions]”: This is referring to the view that realises emptiness. The mind that realises the emptiness of persons and phenomena exactly as they are is a mind that has fully internalised the view. The result of familiarising with such a view is that there is release from the obscurations. By familiarising oneself over and over again with the view of emptiness, conjoined with the factor of method, compassion and bodhicitta, one will be able to remove the two obscurations.

The next verse is a proof establishing what I have said with respect to Verse 155.

#### Verse 156

The essential constituent is empty of the adventitious [defilements]

Which have the character of being separable [from its entity].

It is not empty of the unsurpassed [qualities of the powers and so forth]

Which have the character of not being separable [from it].

I think the first two lines of Verse 156 are saying that if one meditates on the antidotes, the defilements can be removed. The ultimate nature of the mind, i.e., its emptiness of true existence, has always existed since beginningless time. That ultimate nature of the mind is not newly created or newly established. It has always been like that.

This emptiness of true existence carries the potential for any individual to achieve enlightenment and to acquire all the different qualities of buddhahood, such as the ten powers and so forth.

As said earlier, the mind’s emptiness of true existence has always existed. That has always been the nature of the mind. As such, the mind has the capacity to develop the qualities of enlightenment.

When we talk about separating the defilements from the mind, it is not a separation that is newly arisen or newly created, for from the very beginning, the nature of the mind is unafflicted as the defilements have not abided in the nature of the mind. As such, we do not talk about newly separating the defilements from the nature of the mind as its nature has never been afflicted. Therefore, the defilements are adventitious. They are suitable to be removed and they can be removed.

Verse 157 expresses a qualm.



## Verse 157

Throughout [the scriptures of the middle wheel of the doctrine] it is said that all objects of knowledge are empty in all respects  
 Like clouds [which are unstable and lack inherent existence],  
 dreams [which, although experienced, lack inherent existence],  
 and a magician's illusions [which, although appearing, lack inherent existence],  
 But why has the Conqueror said here [in the scriptures of the final wheel of doctrine]  
 That the essence of a Buddha exists [from the start spontaneously in the continuums of] sentient beings?

In the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, the Buddha said that all phenomena, i.e., "all objects of knowledge," are "like clouds, [which are unstable and lack inherent existence], dreams [which, although experienced, lack inherent existence], and a magician's illusions [which, although appearing, lack inherent existence]." All phenomena are adventitious.

But in the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, in the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, the Buddha said that all sentient beings possess naturally this tathagata essence, the essence of Buddha.

Isn't this a contradiction? On the one hand, the Buddha said that all phenomena are like clouds, dreams, and a magician's illusions, which are adventitious. Then on the other hand, the Buddha said that by nature, there is something in sentient beings called the tathagata essence.

Then there is another qualm that says there is no point talking about the tathagata essence because, in the context for ordinary beings, no matter what you say, ordinary beings do not realise the tathagata essence. Why do you want to talk about tathagata essence to ordinary beings?

The answer is in Verse 158.

## Verse 158

It was set forth so that persons having the five faults might abandon them—  
 [The fault of] a discouraged mind [and non-enthusiasm for the path, which is to think that enlightenment cannot be achieved; this is due to not knowing that the ultimate basic element exists in oneself, and such discouragement is an obstacle to generating the intention to become enlightened; the fault of non-respect] despising others as lowly, [thinking that these sentient beings are low; this is due to not knowing of its existence in others and is an obstacle to assuming the care of others;  
 The fault of] incorrect conception [falsely holding that the adventitious defilements exist in the basic element whereas from the start they do not; this is due to not knowing of its existence in all others and is an obstacle to the wisdom realizing

the true mode of subsistence; the fault of] deprecating the true qualities [thinking that good qualities which are indivisible in entity with the basic element do not exist whereas they do;  
And the fault of] excessive attachment to oneself [due to not knowing that the nature of the element of a Superior's qualities is equal in oneself and others, this being an obstacle to realizing oneself and others as equal].

We will just look at this on Thursday when we will finish this module.

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SHARING BY STUDENT

Khen Rinpoche: Today I have asked Kelvin to talk to all of you. Last time, during the first Basic Program, we used to have some kind of sharing. So I thought it is good, maybe for ten minutes, for Kelvin to share his experience. It may be helpful for some people.

Kelvin: Thank you Khen Rinpoche for giving me this opportunity to share. I'm very honoured to do so. I'm Kelvin, a Malaysian from Penang who is currently staying in Singapore. Before studying Buddhist philosophy, I was like the majority of Buddhists—going to temples, offering incense to statues of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and praying that somehow they will look after me and my family. I even attended Sunday schools in church in Penang even though I do not have much inclination towards Christianity.

I guess I must have a very strong connection with Buddhism in my previous lives. My first contact with Buddhist philosophy is in a Chinese lam-rim class taught by Mr. Thor Peng Tiong. He encouraged me to attend classes at ABC because ABC is a very well-established Gelug centre. Therefore, I started attending classes, first by Ven Gyurme and subsequently the classes on special insight by Khen Rinpoche in 2010.

What a special class to start with! At the end of that module, surprisingly, I survived. I thought I had learnt a lot about emptiness because to me emptiness means everything is merely labelled by the mind. How arrogant I was at that time.

After attending the Basic Program, I finally realised that I had no idea of what I was talking about at that time. So when I was asked to share the benefit that I have gained from attending the Basic Program, I started to reflect on how I was before and how I am now.

- Before, I thought I had accumulated a lot of virtue by doing charity, giving donations or whatever. But now, I realise that what I've accumulated is only non-virtue because my motivation is only for this life's happiness alone.
- Before, I thought that maybe in my next life, I will get a good rebirth. But now I realise that the lower realms are what await me if I don't strive to purify my negativities and accumulate strong virtue.

- Before, the Three Jewels seem to be very far away like something high up in the sky looking upon me from afar. But now I feel much closer to the Three Jewels. They are something that we can achieve, realise and actualise if we make the effort.
- Before, I thought karma was something we said and did. But now, I am more mindful of what I think because every single moment of my intention is karma. Every moment of feeling is a result I am experiencing now.

In short, whatever I knew previously was very coarse and superficial mixed with my own bewilderment. But now, after attending the Basic Program, it is like the opening of a door that I never knew existed. How fortunate I am to be able to correct my misconceptions while I am still alive.

Not just that. I still have a sound mind, a fit body and all the conducive conditions to attend classes. It is said that the Buddha's teachings are extremely rare but to me, the Basic Program by ABC is even rarer. We have a perfectly qualified guru, Khen Rinpoche, who is more than qualified to teach the Geshes in Sera, Ganden and Drepung. And I was told that the Kopan monks are willing to give up their hands just to listen to his teachings. But he is here, guiding us. I, such an unworthy student, am indeed truly grateful.

We also have a wonderful translator who makes the difficult points of the root text extremely clear in such an interesting and lively way. Without him, we won't understand anything at all, not to mention the subtle meanings and differences in the teachings. These materials we are studying now used to be available only within the high walls of the monasteries in India and Nepal. Now, it is easily available to us due to the kindness of Khen Rinpoche and Ven. Gyurme.

We also have a group of very diligent seniors who painstakingly strive to prepare the transcripts so that we will never miss a single word by Khen Rinpoche. We also have very thoughtful students who raise questions that I would never have thought of on my own and the very brave ones who engage Khen Rinpoche in debate. These are the moments that I enjoy and learn the most from although I lack the courage to do so myself.

We also have this wonderful building, huge and bright, fully air-conditioned, where we can sit comfortably to listen to the teachings. Each of these conditions alone is difficult to fulfil yet we have all of them now. Isn't this something that is worth rejoicing in and worth making full use of while I'm still able to before impermanence grasps me?

- The immediate benefit I had gained by attending the Basic Program is that I am now able to understand teachings by other teachers as well, such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and even the Chinese Mahayana teachers in Taiwan, although they are mostly from the Mind Only School.
- I come to appreciate that the teachings of the Buddha are coherent and free of contradictions. It is like being given a road map to enlightenment. I can map out all the teachings I receive by using this map to relate to them.

- Also, my faith in karma and its results have increased as a result of studying the Basic Program. Before, I thought I could be lucky and get away with karma. To me, it was like one plus one, i.e., if I did something bad, I better do something good to negate it. But now I know that is just wishful thinking.
- Also, I started to think of my future lives' happiness as well. Whatever I do know, I will sometimes consider my action so that it will bring me mainly the happiness of future lives.
- Due to studying in the Basic Program, my faith in the Three Jewels has increased. Before that, I thought Buddha was someone who had already passed away a long time ago. Dharma was just the teachings whereas practice just meant meditation. But now, I realised the Dharma can be practised daily. It is something we can do for even achieving this life's happiness, not to mention the happiness of all our future lives, including achieving liberation and enlightenment.

In short, I'm happier now, having attended the Basic Program. I look forward to coming to the classes, attending the discussions and even the exams, although they are a bit scary. In fact, I feel that the exam is a very important part of the Basic Program because it is through the exam that I put in the effort to study and it's through the exam that I can check whether my understanding is correct or not.

In most courses offered by other centres, there are no exams. So whatever I learnt from them hardly stayed in my mind. But due to the constant reminders from Khen Rinpoche and the pressure from the exams, I somehow managed to remember some points, even from the very first module.

Having no realisations and having studied only a meagre amount, what I've just said may seem laughable to those intelligent ones. But if somehow these words managed to be of benefit, even for just one sentient being, may it be a cause of enlightenment for all sentient beings. Thank you.

Khen Rinpoche: In the last Basic Program, we used to have some students who will come and talk about their experiences. We hadn't done this for some time. I thought maybe sometimes it is good to have these talks by Basic Program students. I may ask some of you to come and share. If you think BP is good, you say, "Good." If it is not good, you say, "Not good." So come and share your experience when I ask you to come.

When I mention exams, some people might be stressed. But like he said, he learnt something from the first module because of the exams. So sometimes, it's good when you have some pressure. If you really want to learn something, sometimes we need this.

Anyway, this time, you don't have to be so scared. I will leave it up to you how you want to write your exam answers. But try your best, OK?

Last time, also, we used to ask you to write. If you were to give a talk to a Buddhist who is just a beginner, how you are going to present the material? Then you write one page. Last time, we did that. So you thought and wrote one page or two pages.

This time, it is also a similar idea but related to this topic. I may say, “Explain the tathagata essence in one or two pages.” You can write maybe two or three pages. That is just an example but not just three sentences. Three pages!

It depends on how you want to write. By coming to class, learning about the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels, learning about the tathagata essence, how are they related?

Somebody may ask you, “You have been coming to class for three months. What have you learnt? Write this down in three pages.” I mean it is something like that. You can write whatever you like. You can read the text. Anyway, we will decide on what we want you to write about. We will talk about this on Thursday.

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