

## **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 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 26**

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Chapter One: *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*. Verses 157—168. Verses 157—158: The person who realises the tathagata essence. Verse 157: The qualms. Verse 158: Persons having the five faults. Verses 159—160: Answers to the qualms in Verse 157. Verse 161: Purpose of teaching the tathagata essence in the second and third turnings of the wheel of Dharma. Verses 162—166: Expanding on the five faults. Verses 167—168: The qualities that are developed.

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### **THE PERSON WHO REALISES THE TATHAGATA ESSENCE (CONT'D)**

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?

A qualm is raised in Verse 157: In "the middle," i.e., the second, turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha mentioned in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* that phenomena are like clouds, dreams and a magician's illusions that are empty of existing inherently. As such, all phenomena are adventitious. In "the final," i.e., the third, turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha said in the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra* that the essence of a buddha exists and penetrates the very nature of the mind of all sentient beings.

Isn't there a contradiction? On the one hand, the Buddha said that things do not exist inherently. Then on the other hand, the Buddha said that the essence of a buddha exists and penetrates the very nature of the mind of sentient beings. So this is one qualm.

The other qualm is this: Since ordinary beings do not realise the tathagata essence, what is the purpose of teaching ordinary beings about the tathagata essence?

*Persons having the five faults*

The answer is in the next verse. There are five reasons for teaching that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings.

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].

~ Reason No. 1

"[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."

One of the obstacles to generating the mind of enlightenment is not understanding that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings. If one thinks that one has no capacity or the potential to achieve enlightenment, one will get discouraged and will not cultivate the mind of enlightenment.

One of the reasons for teaching the existence of the tathagata essence in all sentient beings is that it is an antidote to such a discouraged mind, i.e., the first reason is to

stop any sense of discouragement, thinking that it is not possible to achieve enlightenment.

All sentient beings possess the tathagata essence. This will include oneself. So one knows that one possesses the tathagata essence. It has always been there, existing naturally. The essential point is to stop discouragement in generating the mind of enlightenment. If there are times when we feel discouraged, if we can understand well how we ourselves possess the tathagata essence, it will be helpful in counteracting this discouragement.

You will find similar advice in Shantideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* where he said that even insects can achieve enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> If that is so, then why not us? The line of reasoning is the same!

~ Reason No. 2

"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 second reason for teaching the existence of the tathagata essence in all sentient beings is to abandon the fault of looking down on others. Even if one has generated bodhicitta but if one does not understand or realise that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, it is possible to think, "I can achieve enlightenment but there are others who cannot make it." In that sense, one looks down on and despises others.

If that happens, that becomes an obstacle to the cultivation of the bodhisattva practice and it is also an impediment for one's bodhisattva practice to increase. By knowing that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, one abandons the fault of looking down on others. This will help with one's practice of the bodhisattva deeds.

~ Reason No. 3

"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 next reason for teaching the tathagata essence is that it helps us to understand the mode of abiding of phenomena in that it helps to remove the obstacles that prevent us from understanding the ultimate nature of phenomena.

There is a "fault of incorrect conception" that incorrectly holds the adventitious defilements to exist. While the afflictions are incorrect, there is the apprehension that views the afflictions to be correct. That kind of view is an exaggeration or superimposition.

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<sup>1</sup> "If they develop the strength of their exertion, / Even those who are flies, mosquitoes, bees and insects / Will win the unsurpassable Awakening, / Which is so hard to find." (Verse 18, Chapter 7).

We can take the apprehension of true existence as an example. Most tenets assert that such a mind and phenomena are truly existent. Holding on to the view of true existence, i.e., that a phenomenon is truly existent, is a superimposition or exaggeration of reality. This obstructs one's understanding and realisation of the mode of abiding of phenomena.

~ *Reason No. 4*

“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.”

Next is the fault of deprecating the tathagata essence, i.e., denying that it exists in sentient beings.

There is a purpose to teaching the tathagata essence in that it eliminates the fault of superimposition (or exaggeration) and the fault of denial (or deprecation). Also, it helps to delineate properly the two facets of reality. On the one hand, the mind is empty of existing truly, yet it is still feasible for us to posit an action and the actor. Through understanding the tathagata essence, one eliminates the faults of exaggeration and deprecation. Through that, one comes to understand how the two truths exist and how they can exist as a unit.

~ *Reason No. 5*

“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].”

In order to generate the mind of enlightenment, we need to meditate on exchanging self and others. So, in order to remove any obstacles to cultivating that, the tathagata essence is taught. If we realise that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, that means oneself and all sentient beings are equal in having the tathagata essence. If we are able to see and feel that sameness, that provides the basis for one to be able to meditate on exchanging oneself with others. Through that, bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, can be generated.

Through understanding the tathagata essence, one comes to abandon these five faults. Through that, one is able to meditate on exchanging self and others. Through that, one is able to generate the mind of enlightenment. Through that, one is able to engage in the bodhisattva deeds in general and in particular to train in the last two perfections.

### **ANSWERS TO THE QUALMS IN VERSE 157**

Verse 159

The limit of reality [the naturally pure basic element] is devoid  
Of compounded phenomena in all respects.

[The three phenomena of which it is empty—] the afflictive  
emotions, actions [of non-virtue and so forth], and the fruitions  
[of those, these being the mental and physical aggregates and so  
forth—]

Are said to be like clouds and so forth.

Verse 160

The afflictive emotions are said to be similar to clouds [in that they pervade and adventitiously obstruct the basic element of sentient beings].

Contaminated actions [which are motivated by those afflictive emotions] are like objects used in a dream [since they are generated by an erroneous awareness and are objects of a mistaken consciousness].

The [mental and physical] aggregates which are the fruitions of afflictive emotions and [contaminated] actions

Are like a magician's illusions, emanations, [and so forth in that although they appear variously in dependence upon conditions, when analyzed they are not true].

These two verses are essentially the answer to the first qualm about how there seems to be a contradiction between about what was said in the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma and the final turning of the wheel of Dharma. In the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha said that all phenomena are adventitious in that they don't exist truly. Then in the last turning the wheel of Dharma, the Buddha said that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, within the very nature of their mind.

"The limit of reality" is another way of saying emptiness. In this context here, the limit of reality refers to the natural purity of the minds of sentient beings, i.e., the tathagata essence.

"This limit of reality [the naturally pure basic element] is devoid of compounded phenomena in all respects." This means that it is devoid of all phenomena that are included within true sufferings and true origins. The defilements have never resided within the very nature of the mind. As such, the limit of reality, the tathagata essence, is devoid of these compounded phenomena and as such, the defilements are adventitious.

What has to be understood is that true sufferings and true origins are empty of existing truly. The principal true origins are the afflictions and the principal among all the afflictions is the apprehension of true existence, ignorance. Ignorance has never existed truly and like any other phenomenon, does not exist truly. Ignorance—the apprehension of true existence—has never resided within the very nature of the mind, i.e., it is not the nature of the mind to be ignorant. As such, ignorance *is* adventitious.

You need to think about what this means. How is it that the apprehension of true existence has never resided within the very nature of the mind? How does ignorance apprehend its object? What does ignorance apprehend? The thing that ignorance is holding on to has never existed on the mind.

We say the mind is afflicted but *the nature* of the mind is *not* afflicted and is pure by nature. The defilements are adventitious and have never resided within the very

nature of the mind. The chief among the defilements is ignorance, i.e., the apprehension of true existence. So when we say that the nature of the mind is unafflicted, it is akin to saying that the nature of the mind is unafflicted by ignorance. Ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, has never resided within the very nature of the mind.

Why is it that ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, has never resided within the very nature of the mind? This is what we need to think about and this is how we can go about doing so:

- Ignorance is grasping at something; it conceives phenomena to exist in a certain way.
- Whatever is conceived by ignorance, the very thing that ignorance is holding on to or believes in, has never existed in the mind.

*Khen Rinpoche: Do you understand?*

It is said that we are pure by nature; that by nature, we are not afflicted. The afflictions are temporary and adventitious. There is hope that all of us can become buddhas. This is what is said. But saying all of this is one thing. Can we prove it?

- We say that the defilements are adventitious but there are many defilements. Obviously, we have to look at the most critical defilement, i.e., ignorance, the apprehension of true existence.
- If defilements are adventitious, that means ignorance must also be adventitious.
- If ignorance is adventitious, this means that the apprehension of true existence has never resided within the very nature of the mind.
- How can that be? That can only be the case if what ignorance conceives of is not the nature of the mind.

The main thing to be established is that what ignorance conceives is inherent existence but inherent existence has never existed and it will never exist. That is what we need to understand. If we can prove that whatever ignorance conceives does not exist, then we can see that all phenomena, including the mind, has never existed truly and are not truly existent.

### *Summary*

We are looking at the first two lines of Verse 159: “The limit of reality [the naturally pure basic element] is devoid of compounded phenomena in all respects.”

- “The limit of reality” means emptiness in general, but specifically here, we are talking about the mind’s emptiness of true existence, the tathagata essence.
- This tathagata essence “is devoid of compounded phenomena in all respects.” “Compounded phenomena” here refers to everything that is included within true sufferings and true origins, the principal being true origins.
- Among true origins, the main ones are the afflictions.
- Among the afflictions, the principal affliction is the apprehension of true existence.

If we were to condense these two lines of the text, we can rephrase it by saying, “The tathagata essence (or the limit of reality) is devoid of the apprehension of true

existence.” What we have to establish is that the apprehension of true existence has never resided within the nature of the mind, i.e., it is not in the nature of the mind to be ignorant.

- The point is that whatever ignorance conceives is not within the nature of the mind, i.e., it is not the nature of the mind to be that which is conceived by ignorance.
- What then is the conceived object of ignorance? It is inherent existence or true existence. What we are trying to prove is that the conceived object of ignorance, inherent existence, has never existed. It is not an existent and it will never exist.
- If one can see how ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, has never resided within the nature of the mind, then we can come to understand that ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, is adventitious.
- If we can establish that ignorance is adventitious, then we can also establish that the afflictions that are induced by ignorance and the effects of the karma that is accumulated or motivated by the afflictions are also adventitious.

What we need to understand is that ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, is adventitious. If we can establish that ignorance is adventitious, then we can establish that the karma that is motivated by ignorance must be adventitious. We can also establish that the ripening or fruition effects that we experience must be adventitious as well.

Normally we think that there is no way out of samsara. Samsara is fixed, permanent, and unchanging. It is so real that we cannot free ourselves from suffering as there is nothing we can do about suffering. This is the heart of the matter.

But because the lineage exists, therefore the defilements are adventitious. How are the defilements adventitious? The key to understanding that defilements are adventitious is to first focus on the chief affliction, ignorance, and see how that is adventitious.

We can see that ignorance, the apprehension of true existence, is adventitious when we establish that the conceived object of ignorance, the object that ignorance believes in and holds on to, has never existed and will never exist. Then we can posit that ignorance is adventitious and it can be removed.

This means that it is imperative to have some understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, the emptiness of inherent existence. This is said in the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma—that the afflictions, karma and its fruition effects, are empty of existing truly. They are like clouds, dreams, illusions and so forth. Furthermore, the mind is also empty of existing truly.

The point is this. In the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma, it is established that *all* phenomena are empty of existing truly. This means that the mind must be included. So, the mind is also empty of existing truly. If the mind is empty of existing truly, it follows that the defilements are adventitious.

In the final turning of the wheel of Dharma, what is referred to as the tathagata essence is none other than the mind's emptiness of true existence.

Therefore, there is no contradiction between what was said in the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma and the last turning of the wheel of Dharma. The intent of the Buddha behind those statements is the same.

- The afflictions are said to be like clouds because afflictions are adventitious.
- Since karma is motivated by an erroneous mind, therefore, it is like a dream.
- The fruition of karma motivated by the afflictions, the aggregates (the body and mind), are like illusions conjured by a magician in that although they appear to exist truly, in fact, they do not exist truly.

#### Verse 161

Having made the presentation earlier [in the middle wheel of doctrine that all phenomena, though appearing, are empty of inherent existence],

Again here [on the occasion of teaching] the sublime continuum [the unbroken continuum of the element of a Superior's qualities],

It was taught [with many variants in verbalization and with many examples and reasons that] "The basic constituent just exists,"

In order that the five faults might be abandoned.

So, if you were asked, "What is the purpose of the Buddha teaching in the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma that all phenomena are empty of existing truly and, in the last turning of the wheel of Dharma, that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings?", the purpose of those teachings is so that the five faults mentioned earlier can be abandoned.

### EXPANDING ON THE FIVE FAULTS

What follows is an expanded explanation of the five faults.

#### Verse 162

For, not hearing in this way that [the basic constituent exists],

Some—whose minds are discouraged due to the fault

Of deriding oneself [thinking, "How could one such as I attain enlightenment!"]—

Do not generate the intention to become enlightened [in which one thinks, "I will actualize the nature, the ultimate Buddha."]

What the verse says here is the same as what was said earlier. If one understands that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, this would include oneself, i.e., it means that one has the tathagata essence. If one has the tathagata essence, one understands that one *can* become enlightened. If one understands that one can become enlightened, that means one can dispel any discouragement, thinking, "There is no way that I will become a buddha."



The next verse is an explanation of how, by understanding that the tathagata essence exists in all sentient beings, one can then remove the impediments to the development and increase of one's practice of the bodhisattva deeds after one has generated bodhicitta.

Verse 163

Some who have generated the intention to become enlightened  
Fancy, "I am supreme [a Bodhisattva],"  
Whereby they discriminate [others] who have not generated  
The intention to become enlightened as lower [than themselves].

After generating bodhicitta, in order for one's practice of the bodhisattva deeds to develop more and more, one must understand the mode of abiding of phenomena. As such, one needs to eliminate or dispel the impediments to that understanding.

The impediments to realising the final mode of abiding of phenomena are mentioned in Verse 164.

Verse 164

In those who think thus [that the Buddha-essence does not exist],  
Knowledge of reality [the mode of subsistence free from  
superimposition and deprecation] is not generated.  
Thereby, they hold [a view superimposing] the unreal  
And, not knowing the meaning of reality, [deprecate it].

If one apprehends the afflictions such as the apprehension of true existence to be real and truly existent, this becomes an obstacle to realising that phenomena are "unreal" and that all phenomena do not exist truly. What is mentioned in Verse 164 is the same as what I mentioned earlier. If one has the view of superimposition or deprecation (i.e., denying certain facets of reality), these will be obstacles to realising the mode of abiding, the ultimate nature of reality.

In verse 165, the methods to dispel those impediments are mentioned.

Verse 165

Because of being fabricated [by conditions] and being adventitious,  
The faults [i.e., the afflictive emotions and so forth] of sentient  
beings do not [exist as they own] reality.  
In reality those faults are selfless  
[And thus the basic constituent has from the start] a pure nature of  
good qualities.

Afflictions such as attachment, anger and so forth do not exist truly because they arise due to certain causes and conditions. As such, the afflictions themselves are adventitious. The tathagata essence has this "pure nature of good qualities" from the beginning. This refers to the natural purity of the mind, i.e., the mind is by nature pure because it does not exist truly.

Again, this is the same as what was said earlier. The natural purity of the mind refers to the mind's emptiness of true existence. The mind has never existed truly. This includes the defilements. Whatever is conceived of by ignorance has never been the nature of the mind. Another way of saying this is that the mind has never been truly existent. As such, the mind is by nature pure.

The next verse talks about the impediments to the generation of love and compassion.

Verse 166

[The Bodhisattva] who possesses an attitude of holding unreal faults [as the reason for viewing that the basic constituent does not exist]

And who deprecates the true qualities [of the powers and so forth]

Does not attain the [great] love seeing

Oneself and sentient beings as equal.

### THE QUALITIES THAT ARE DEVELOPED

Verse 167

From hearing in this way [that the naturally pure realm exists without difference in all],

One generates enthusiasm [for the path upon seeing that Buddhahood can be achieved], respect [for other sentient beings that values them even] like the Teacher [Buddha],

The wisdom [knowing that the conventional defilements do not inherently exist], the exalted wisdom [realizing the entity of the basic constituent in which the basic element and knowledge are indivisible], and the great love [which is the equality of oneself and others].

Due to generating those five [beneficial] phenomena [in the mental continuum],

- From hearing that the tathagata essence exists in everyone, one generates enthusiasm and perhaps the wish and desire to achieve enlightenment.
- Also, it is said that if one realises that the tathagata essence—the potential to develop the qualities of buddhahood—pervades all sentient beings, one will be able to respect other sentient beings as if they are like the Buddha.
- One can also develop the wisdom that realises the emptiness of true existence.
- It is said that if we realise how all sentient beings possess the tathagata essence, this can help also in the achievement of great love. The highest bliss is the bliss of full enlightenment. Great love is wishing that all sentient beings have the bliss of enlightenment.

Verse 168

There is no unseemliness [because of being free from discouragement of mind and so forth; one views] self and other as equal [without low and high;

One knows the fact that the adventitious defilements of] faults do not exist [by way of their own entityness] and that good qualities are [naturally] possessed;  
[And one attains the great] love which is the equality of oneself and sentient beings [as having the essence of a Buddha].  
From [those five] Buddhahood is quickly attained.

Thus ends the first chapter, *The Essence of a One Gone Thus*, in Maitreya's *Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime Continuum, Discriminating the Lineage [of the Three Jewels]*.

- If we despise ourselves, putting ourselves down in a negative and unproductive way, this is actually a fault. So the first quality that is achieved is that one is freed from the fault of despising oneself.
- The second quality: One is able to see how oneself and others as equal.
- The third quality: One comes to understand that the defilements do not exist inherently.
- The fourth quality: Due to that understanding, one understands that good qualities can be achieved.
- The fifth quality: One also comes to understand that one and others are the same in being able to become a buddha.

It is said that through understanding these points and acquiring these qualities, then one enters the Mahayana path. By meditating and familiarising oneself with the lineage, one will come to be a buddha.

We have come to the end of the first chapter of this *Sublime Continuum*.

*Khen Rinpoche: Now you are enlightened!*

Interpreted by Ven. Tenzin Gyurme; transcribed by Phuah Soon Ek, Vivien Ng & Aki Yeo; edited by Cecilia Tsong.