

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

Lesson 2

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The need for reflection and analysis. Sign of correct meditation. Chapter One: The Essence of a One Gone Thus. Verse 1. Explaining the seven diamond topics from the perspective of the ultimate and the conventional.

NEED FOR REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In one of his writings, Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned that he was not easily satisfied by a meagre amount of learning. Instead he studied extensively the texts composed by the Two Supreme and the Six Ornaments who were the great Indian masters.¹

Lama Tsongkhapa said that in order to free oneself and sentient beings from the three kinds of suffering of cyclic existence and to place oneself and others in the city of liberation, then one must undertake the threefold activities of hearing the teachings, reflecting on their meaning and then familiarising one's mind with what one has ascertained.

The highest or ultimate goal that anybody can achieve is the non-abiding nirvana, a state whereby one's own purpose and the purpose and welfare of others are completely fulfilled. In order to achieve this goal, one must know the path that brings one to that state. Therefore one has to learn and understand that path.

We must remember the reason why we are educating ourselves in the teachings of the Buddha—why we are studying and listening to the teachings and why we are reflecting on them. Our studies here are unlike ordinary education. We are not here to accumulate facts and become intellectuals. Rather, we are here engaging in these

¹ The Two Supreme and the Six Ornaments are Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga, Dharmakirti, Gunaprabha and Shakyaprabha.

extensive studies and reflection with the goal of achieving the non-abiding nirvana. You have to remember this all the time and keep this in your heart.

Lama Tsongkhapa had mentioned that it is not correct to be satisfied with some meagre learning, i.e., it is not correct to be satisfied with knowing just a small portion of the Buddha's teachings or knowing just a single subject matter. Rather one has to know everything. One has to learn everything. One has to study extensively and correctly so that one comes to know what one is going to practise.

Whatever you have learnt through your studies, you should analyse and reflect on it in order to gain a definite conviction and certainty about what you have learnt. It is only through such reflection and analysis that you can gain a definite heartfelt conviction in what you have heard and learnt, "This is really true. This is really the case." This experience will naturally spur you on and make you even more hardworking. You will take an interest in your practice and joyous effort will arise.

With joyous effort, you will meditate on the teachings, i.e., familiarising your mind with what you have ascertained. It is through this process of familiarisation that experiences and realisations of the path will arise in your mind. This is the order of how you are supposed to progress in your learning and practice. As you continue to familiarise your mind with what you have already ascertained, through such repeated familiarisation, the experiences and realisations of the path will arise in your mind, which will then continue to evolve and grow.

As I had mentioned briefly in the last class, on the basis of having examined well the root of all of our problems—i.e., the source of every single misery and problem—when we come to see for ourselves that it is only the Buddha, nobody else, who has clearly shown the way to eradicate the root of all our problems, then a very special kind of trust in and devotion will arise towards the Buddha. We will also realise that the Buddha is really in a class of his own. He is unparalleled compared to other founders of other religious or philosophical traditions. In this way, we ascertain for ourselves that the Buddha is a valid and trustworthy authority.

With respect to his presentation of the four noble truths, the Buddha talked about true sufferings. He said that the true origin of all our problems is our ignorance apprehending a self. The only antidote to that is the wisdom realising selflessness. As before, we have to see for ourselves through thinking and analysis that this is the case. We have to see for ourselves through thinking that the only way out is to understand and realise this very special wisdom that realises selflessness.

This is why it is very important to arrive at this understanding. We really must sit down, reflect and analyse what we have learnt. It is not enough just to hear or just to study the teachings. We must reflect and analyse critically, applying reasoning to what we have heard, "Is this true? Is it really like that?" We have to think deeply until we have gained a conviction. This is what we need to do. So for that purpose, first, we must hear the teachings.

My job here is to present to you the material and explain it to you. In the course of my explanation, if there is anything that you are not sure of, that you are unclear about,

or you have found something that seems to you to be not so correct, then you should bring it up and ask. It is through such questions and answers and discussions that we can shine more light on this material and understand it better.

It is important that you think about these teachings. You must have questions, doubts and qualms. But in order for you to have questions in the first place, you must start by thinking about the material. If you just sit there and accept, “So it is like this. It is like that,” without thinking further, then of course you won’t have any questions.

In order to have questions arise, first you must think, “What is this? What is that?” And in order for that to happen, your mind must be fresh and alert.

Also it will not work if every time you move on to a new section, you forget what was taught in the previous section. If that happens, then of course you will not have any questions either.

All of you have already heard these teachings many times—how we should listen to the teachings and how the teaching should be delivered. It is there in the beginning of the lam-rim literature. You already know this. With regard to how we should listen to the teachings, we need to refresh our memory, remember those teachings and then put them into practice.

SIGN OF CORRECT MEDITATION

I had explained to you the meaning of what a *shastra* or treatise is. A treatise is a text whose subject matter can cure or pacify the enemy, the afflictions in our mind, and protect us from the suffering of the lower realms and the suffering of cyclic existence. This is what the subject matter can do for us. So when we listen to the teachings, we need to do it in such a way that these two functions can actually happen and have these effects on us.

It is mentioned in the advice of the great Kadampa masters of the past that the signs of having studied extensively are being subdued and disciplined. This means the more you learn, over time, you become more subdued, calmer and more peaceful. Also the more you learn, the more you know. That has to be accompanied with less arrogance and less pride. That is something we all need.

It is said that one’s studies have gone wrong if one’s learning only serves to promote one’s arrogance, one’s pride, one’s jealousy of others and one’s negative sense of competitiveness. It is important that these things do not happen because the goal behind learning is to pacify the afflictions in our mind.

Likewise, these Kadampa masters also said, “The sign of having meditated on the teachings is the weakening of one’s afflictions.” This is a correct sign. If one finds one’s afflictions becoming weaker over time as the result of one’s meditation, then this is a sign that one is really meditating well. Whether a person is a great meditator or not depends on whether her afflictions are weakened over time as a result of her meditation. This must be the sign of a great or correct meditator because what has been causing us to suffer, that has been tormenting us and keeping us in cyclic

existence is none other than our afflictions.

Our accumulation of karma is commensurate with the strength of our afflictions. So if the afflictions are very strong and powerful, we tend to accumulate more karma and stronger karma. If the afflictions are weakened, then correspondingly the frequency of the accumulation of karma and the intensity of the karma that is accumulated will, likewise, be weaker.

I don't have to remind you of the importance of setting up the correct motivation for learning. I don't have to do this over and over again. We have to keep this in mind and remind ourselves every time when we have the opportunity to learn the teaching. We need to watch our mind and adjust our motivation accordingly.

Actually you already know this. You have learnt this already but knowing, "I should do this," doesn't help at all. What helps is using what we have heard, what we know and applying it. We have to try to do that.

The whole point of learning the teachings, understanding the teachings and even explaining the teaching is none other than to discipline our own mind and to subdue our mind. This has to be the motivation. That is why setting our motivation in the beginning of the teachings or any practice is emphasised. When we adjust our motivation, it makes a big difference because we are nudging our mind towards the correct direction. Therefore it is very important to do so.

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Verse 1

Buddha, doctrine, community, basic constituent, enlightenment,  
Qualities, and finally, Buddha activities—  
The body of the entire treatise is in brief  
These seven diamond topics.

The subject matter of this treatise, *The Sublime Continuum*, is the seven diamond topics or the seven vajra essential points. They are:

1. Buddha
2. Doctrine (or Dharma)
3. Community (or sangha)
4. Basic constituent
5. Enlightenment
6. Qualities
7. Buddha activities (or enlightened activities)

### **SEVEN DIAMOND TOPICS: (1) BUDDHA**

What is Buddha? One can explain this from an ultimate perspective or from a conventional perspective. We can talk about the ultimate Buddha jewel:

- (1) in the sense of the abandonment of the afflictive obscurations, i.e., the nature truth body (or the *svahhvakaya*)
- (2) in the sense of the wisdom that directly perceives all phenomena, i.e., the wisdom

truth body (or *jnanakaya*)

The usual situation is this. For most people, when they think about the Buddha, they look at the Buddha only from the perspective of his form, just as we tend to perceive another person in relation to the body of that person. This happens when one does not have a good understanding of who the Buddha really is. So we have to think more deeply about this.

The ultimate Buddha Jewel is the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a buddha superior. The ultimate Buddha Jewel refers to the truth body or the *dharmakaya*, which has two divisions:

1. the nature truth body
2. the wisdom truth body

The conventional Buddha Jewel refers to the form body (or *rupakaya*) which also has two divisions:

1. the complete enjoyment body (or *sambhogakaya*)
2. the emanation body (or *nirmanakaya*)

Having said this, more questions will arise:

- What is the nature body?
- What are the true cessations in the continuum of a Buddha?
- What is the wisdom truth body?

In order to fully understand what Buddha is, we have to know all these things.

The same thing goes to the form body.

- What is the enjoyment body?
- What is the emanation body?
- What are their differences?

From this you can see that when you start to think, so many questions come up. As such, there is no way one can know everything simply by reading or studying just one topic or one text. That is impossible! This is because everything is interconnected. What is not obvious under one subject matter or one text, you have to look for it in another teaching or text. Therefore in order to be able to know everything, you have to have an overview of all the Buddha's teachings. You have to study extensively.

In order to succeed in that, you cannot forget what you have learnt earlier after you have finished studying one topic and moved on to another subject or another text. If you forget what you have learnt earlier, it is not possible for you to make all these different connections. Then there is no way that you could build up the complete picture.

## **(2) DHARMA JEWEL**

As this is a Mahayana treatise, we are discussing the presentation of the Three Jewels here in relation to the Mahayana. As such the ultimate Dharma Jewel here refers to

the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of the bodhisattva superior.

The conventional Dharma Jewel would be texts such as the short, middling and extensive *Perfection of Wisdom sutras*.

### **(3) SANGHA JEWEL**

Since we are talking about this in the context of the Mahayana, the ultimate Sangha Jewel here is the true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a bodhisattva superior and the conventional Sangha Jewel is the Mahayana superior.

For those who have not learnt the Buddha's teachings, they will think that the Dharma Jewel is only the teachings of the Buddha and point to a text or the scriptures, "This is the Dharma Jewel." But that is not the real Dharma Jewel.

If you think about it, you will come to see that the ultimate, the actual Dharma Jewel, is the true paths and true cessations because the true paths and true cessations are the actual refuge. The true paths lead to the true cessations that protect and free us from our afflictions and suffering. It is mentioned in the teachings that among the Three Jewels, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the Dharma is our actual refuge that actually protects us. What is this Dharma? It is the true paths and true cessations.

Likewise, the actual Sangha Jewel is the mental quality of the true paths and true cessations. That is the real meaning of the Sangha Jewel but there are many people who are not aware of this. When they think about the sangha, they basically think of the ordained people.

From this short explanation, you can see how important it is to study widely because the more you know, the more information you will have at your disposal for you to think about, to work out and for your critical analysis.

Likewise, the more you know about the Three Jewels, you will come to a better understanding of them and that will definitely help with your faith in and devotion towards the Three Jewels. Studying extensively can also help to make your faith and devotion much more stable.

But, as I have said earlier, all these benefits will not happen if you just listen to the teachings. They are not going to happen through mere listening to the teachings. If, on the other hand, on the basis of having heard and read the teachings, you think about them and analyse them till you come to the point, "This is really true. It cannot be anything else," then of course your ascertainment will promote faith and trust in and devotion towards the Three Jewels.

### **(4) BASIC CONSTITUENT**

Likewise, you can look at the basic constituent in an ultimate way or a conventional way:

- The basic constituent from the ultimate point of view refers to the emptiness of

inherent existence of the minds of sentient beings.

- The basic constituent from the conventional point of view refers to the potential in the minds of sentient beings that is amenable to the development of both worldly and transcendental qualities.

## (5) ENLIGHTENMENT

There is also an explanation of enlightenment from the ultimate or conventional point of view. The explanation of enlightenment is the same as that for the Buddha Jewel.

- Enlightenment from the ultimate point of view refers to the dharmakaya.
- Enlightenment from the conventional point of view refers to the rupakaya.

Then a qualm will naturally arise: If Buddha and enlightenment are the same thing, what is the point of repeating them, mentioning them twice by using different words?

Although Buddha and enlightenment are referring to the same thing, Buddha refers to the buddha that you can and will become but it has not happened yet. Enlightenment on the other hand refers to the buddhahood that has already been attained by others, i.e., it is possessed by somebody other than yourself.

## (6) QUALITIES

- The ultimate qualities refer to the qualities of the Buddha such as the ten powers and so forth.
- The conventional qualities refer to the twelve ripened qualities. The Buddha possesses the 32 major signs. I guess these could also be posited as conventional qualities.

## (7) BUDDHA ACTIVITIES

- The ultimate Buddha activities would be the activities of wisdom. An illustration would be the wisdom of accomplishment.
- The conventional Buddha activities would be the enlightened activities of the Buddha such as the activity of giving teachings of the Dharma.

These are what are mentioned in the teachings about these seven vajra points from the ultimate and conventional perspectives.

| SEVEN DIAMOND TOPICS | ULTIMATE                                                                                                                                                                                                         | CONVENTIONAL                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Buddha Jewel      | The true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a Buddha superior or the truth body ( <i>dharmakaya</i> ):<br>1. the nature body ( <i>svabhavakaya</i> )<br>2. the wisdom truth body ( <i>Jnanakaya</i> ) | The Buddha's form body ( <i>rupakaya</i> ):<br>1. the complete enjoyment body ( <i>sambhogakaya</i> )<br>2. the emanation body ( <i>nirmanakaya</i> ) |
| 2. Dharma Jewel      | The true paths and true cessations in the continuum of the bodhisattva superior.                                                                                                                                 | Texts such as the short, middling and the extensive <i>Perfection of Wisdom Sutras</i> .                                                              |

| SEVEN DIAMOND TOPICS                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | ULTIMATE                                                                         | CONVENTIONAL                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. Sangha Jewel                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | The true paths and true cessations in the continuum of the bodhisattva superior. | Mahayana superior                                                                                                         |
| 4. Basic constituent (or tathagata essence)                                                                                                                                                                                                       | The emptiness of inherent existence of the minds of sentient beings.             | The potential in sentient beings' minds that is amenable to the development of both worldly and transcendental qualities. |
| 5. Enlightenment (This is the same as the ultimate & conventional Buddha Jewel but Buddha refers to the buddha that you will become in the future whereas enlightenment refers to what has already been achieved by someone other than yourself). | The state of dharmakaya of the Buddha.                                           | The form body of the Buddha                                                                                               |
| 6. Quality                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | The qualities of the Buddha such as the ten powers.                              | 12 ripened qualities, the 32 major marks of the Buddha and so forth.                                                      |
| 7. Buddha activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | The activities of wisdom, e.g., the wisdom of accomplishment                     | The enlightened activities of the Buddha such as the activity of teaching the Dharma.                                     |



*Question:* Why is there a division of these topics into the ultimate and the conventional?

*Answer:* Before we can appreciate why there is such a presentation, first, you must have some understanding of the two truths.

The two truths is an explanation of what constitutes reality that is referring to what actually exists. The presentation of reality, anything that exists, can be subsumed into the two levels that we call the ultimate truth and the conventional truth.

On the basis of any chosen object that exists, that object has the two levels of truth to it:

- There is a level of truth that is in harmony with or consistent with what appears and how the object actually exists. The level of truth where there is no disparity between how the object appears and how the object exists is called the ultimate truth.
- There is another level of truth whereby there is a disparity between how that object exists compared to how it appears. This level of truth is called the conventional truth.

Because there are these two levels of truth to any phenomenon, these truths are apprehended by two different minds:

- A valid cogniser distinguishing an ultimate
- A valid cogniser distinguishing a conventionality



These two levels of truth for any chosen phenomenon are what constitute reality or existence. That is the nature of things, of how things are.

The presentation of the four noble truths is based on an understanding of these two truths. Why? Because there is a level of truth that is a fundamental disparity between how things appear and how they actually exist. There are states of mind or consciousnesses that misperceive reality, assenting to this disparity by engaging it in an erroneous way thereby bringing on suffering. This distorted state of mind is what constitutes true origins. Because of this distorted state of mind, you have its result, problems and all the sufferings. This is the true origins and true sufferings of the four noble truths. .

We can apply this understanding to a specific example, a person or the 'I'. When we think of the 'I', whether it is pertaining to ourselves or someone else, how does it appear to our mind? First, the foundation is the appearance of something real and independent, existing right there from its own side, existing inherently and existing truly. There is such an appearance.

But not only is there this appearance but we assent to that appearance and we believe in that appearance. We hold on to it, "It is really true! That is how it is!" It appears in that way and that is how it is. Then this becomes the source for anger and attachment to arise.

When an affliction arises, we follow after that affliction and we accumulate karma. When we accumulate karma, we have to experience its result. We are propelled along the cycle of death and rebirth. This is how we circle in samsara.

By not understanding how this disparity between appearance and reality is false and by believing in it, we generate the true origins that lead to true sufferings. This is from the view of the conventional truth.

Based on the final nature of reality—the ultimate truth—when there is no disparity between appearance and existence, we have true paths and true cessations.

When we use the term, 'the two truths,' this is what reality is. The explanation of what constitutes reality is these two levels of truth. Because reality is such with these two levels of truth, therefore when we talk about the path leading to freedom from all problems and suffering, there is also method and wisdom.

What is this wisdom? This wisdom is explained from the perspective of the mind that understands the ultimate nature of reality, the ultimate truth. When you are engaged in seeking permanent freedom from all suffering, you need to cultivate a path that combines both method and wisdom.

Because there is this path that combines both method and wisdom, what you can achieve in the end are the two bodies, the form body and the truth body of a buddha.

By depending on the path of wisdom, the wisdom directly perceiving selflessness, you achieve the final true paths and true cessations. The final true paths and true

cessations that are in the continuum of the Buddha superior is the ultimate Buddha Jewel.

From this you can see, that with reality as the basis of the two truths, by engaging in the path that combines both method and wisdom, you can achieve the two bodies of the Buddha.

The method aspect of the path would be cultivating qualities such as great compassion and bodhicitta. By depending on such a path, the method aspect culminates in the achievement of the conventional Buddha Jewel, the form body of a buddha.

Now you will have some idea as to why we talk about the Buddha Jewel in the ultimate sense and in the conventional sense. But that is one way of explaining the two truths. There are also other ways of explaining the ultimate and the conventional.

The true paths and true cessations in the continuum of a Buddha superior is the direct object of utilisation of the buddhas, i.e., it can only be apprehended by other buddhas. Only a buddha can directly realise another buddha's true paths and true cessations. In that sense, this quality in the mental continuum of a Buddha superior is the ultimate, highest attainment.

The conventional Buddha Jewel refers to the two form bodies—the complete enjoyment body and the emanation body. The emanation body can be seen by disciples who have pure karma. The complete enjoyment body can be seen by bodhisattva superiors whose mind are more developed. Bodhisattvas are not buddhas. They are still sentient beings. So the conventional Buddha Jewel is accessible to sentient beings. In that sense, the form bodies are called conventional. This is another way of explaining the conventional Buddha Jewel and the ultimate Buddha Jewel.

When we talk about the Dharma Jewel, this is also presented in as the ultimate Dharma Jewel and the conventional Dharma Jewel. The ultimate Dharma Jewel is true paths and true cessations, the actual or real Dharma Jewel that protects us.

The conventional Dharma Jewel refers to the scriptures, sutras and actual teachings of the Buddha. The ultimate Dharma Jewel is what actually protects us. So when we say that the conventional Dharma Jewel refers to the sutras or the teachings, the word 'conventional' conveys the sense that it is not the actual thing that protects you. It is the ultimate Dharma Jewel, the true paths and true cessations that protects you.

*Khen Rinpoche: That was a good question.*

When we are learning these teachings, it is inevitable that different words are used, which may be challenging for some people. Setting aside their meaning, even the words themselves are difficult.

*Question:* Is the definition of the ultimate buddha nature, 'the emptiness of sentient

beings' mind' or 'the sentient beings' minds' emptiness?

*Answer:* If we are not debating or analysing further, then you can treat these two terms to be the same. What is usually said is that the basic constituent (also referred to as the naturally abiding lineage) or tathagata essence refers to the suchness of the mind of sentient beings. I think I will not explain further as you may get confused.

*Question:* When we are referring to the three refuge jewels, to understand them in a simple way, can I say that:

- the ultimate refuge jewel—be it the ultimate Buddha Jewel, Dharma Jewel or Sangha Jewel—is a mental quality since they refer to the true paths and true cessations in the mental continua of a Buddha superior or bodhisattva superior whereas
- the conventional refuge jewel is something physical such as a person like the Buddha or an arya bodhisattva or the actual scriptural teachings?

*Khen Rinpoche:* Yes, you can say that.

*Question:* Under qualities, the ultimate qualities refer to the ten powers. How are these ten powers related to the ultimate truth? Are they all wisdoms?

*Answer:* Yes, they are mainly wisdoms.

This is just a brief presentation of the seven vajra points. They will be further elaborated in the subsequent verses. Most of this chapter is dedicated to the tathagata essence. Then there is also an explanation on the purpose of explaining these vajra topics and why they are ordered in this particular way.

Whether you understand or not at this point, what you have to do is to at least memorize what these seven vajra topics are, what constitutes the ultimate Buddha Jewel, the conventional Buddha Jewel and so forth. When you have memorised this material, then you will have something to work with and your understanding will be clearer as you make your way through this text. That is the foundation. You must remember these points.

The question was asked, "Why were these topics presented from the ultimate and the conventional perspectives?" The whole point of doing so is to make things clearer. Otherwise, we can just say, "Buddha." But we want to know what a buddha is. To make that clearer, the text explains, "From the ultimate point of view, it is this and from the conventional point of view, it is this." That in turn will lead to many other questions. Then the subject matter becomes clearer and clearer.

If you were to look at Buddha from the top down, these questions will arise:

- Why are there these two bodies—the truth bodies and the form bodies of the Buddha? The answer is that there is the path that consists of method and wisdom.
- Why is the path like that? Because the reality is that there are two levels of truth.
- Why are there these two truths?
- What is the ultimate truth?

- What is the conventional truth?
- What does it mean when it is said that there is no disparity between how something appears and how it exists?
- What does it mean when it is said that there is a disparity between how something appears and how it exists?
- How do these two levels of truth constitute every single phenomenon?

So it is not easy.

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