

Transcript of the oral commentary by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on Dharmarakshita's *Wheel-Weapon Mind Training*

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Lesson 8

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Discussion session.

Question: In an earlier lesson you mentioned that the bodhisattva superiors of definite lineage don't have any more karma and afflictions. They take on the suffering of sentient beings and take rebirth in samsara willingly. I'm trying to link this information with what we have learnt in the *Tathagata Essence*.

I refer to the bodhisattva superiors that have the level of predispositions of ignorance who are free of contaminated karma but still have uncontaminated karma. In the context of the *Wheel-Weapon Mind Training* text, are the bodhisattva superiors who willingly taking rebirth for the sake of sentient beings bodhisattva superiors of the eighth to the tenth grounds?

When they take rebirth willingly without karma and afflictions, how does their level of predispositions of ignorance affect their karma in the sense that they are still taking rebirth and still have those subtle afflictions?

Can you please explain this in more detail from the perspective of the sutric path?

From the tantric perspective, how do we use the information about the bodhisattva superiors who are willing to take rebirth to benefit sentient beings in terms of their utilising afflictions, such as attachment and so forth?

How does that differ with the different levels of tantra? Does it specifically focus on just taking desire into the path or can a particular bodhisattva superior willingly choose to display wrath for the benefit of sentient beings?

Answer: The bodhisattva superiors that are mentioned in the text are those who take rebirth in cyclic existence intentionally, i.e., due to the force of their prayers. This can be any bodhisattva superior, not necessarily those who are on the pure grounds. Even the bodhisattvas on the first ground takes rebirth in cyclic existence intentionally to benefit sentient beings. Their taking rebirth in cyclic existence is not due to karma and afflictions.

It is said that the bodhisattva superiors do not possess true suffering, i.e., their bodies

are not true suffering. Usually we talk about the suffering of birth, aging, sickness and death. The bodhisattva superiors do not experience them. When one becomes a bodhisattva superior, one's body becomes a mental body.

When the bodhisattva superiors achieve the eighth ground, the afflictions are abandoned. Prior to that, the afflictions are not abandoned. It is not that they can't abandon them but they don't focus on abandoning the afflictions.

Khen Rinpoche: I have my qualms regarding this.

The bodhisattva superiors abandon the afflictions on the eighth ground. If we say that the afflictions are not the main objects of abandonment of the bodhisattva superiors from the first to the seventh grounds, this begets the question: Up to the achievement of the eighth ground, what then is their principal object of abandonment? If you are asked this question, what are you going to say?

Khen Rinpoche: Does anybody have an answer? Somebody says subtle self-cherishing.

I guess we can say that the principal objects of abandonment are the apprehension of true existence and the view of the transitory collection, not desire or attachment. It is clear that desire is not the main object of abandonment for these bodhisattva superiors.

The bodhisattva superiors abandon the afflictions on the eighth ground. The bodhisattva superiors on the three pure grounds take rebirth due to uncontaminated karma and the level of the predispositions of ignorance.

From the first to the eighth grounds, the bodhisattvas still need to depend on coarse exertion to take rebirth. Coarse exertion is exhausted upon the achievement of the eighth ground. But on the three pure grounds, the bodhisattvas still need to depend on subtle exertion to take rebirth. That rebirth happens due to uncontaminated karma and the level of the predispositions of ignorance.

The ordinary bodhisattvas on the path of accumulation and the path of preparation do take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions.

There is also taking rebirth through the force of prayers. For example, the bodhisattvas abiding in the pure land take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the force of their prayers.

It is said that there is no negativity in the pure land. Do these bodhisattvas in the pure land possess afflictions? What do you think?

(Various responses from students).

If you say that they do have afflictions, does that mean they would accumulate karma in the pure land?

Can these bodhisattvas take rebirth in cyclic existence?

Are there bodhisattvas abiding in the pure land who take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions? When you say, “No pervasion,” are you saying that there are bodhisattvas who take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions?

It is clear in the teachings. It is said that the bodhisattvas abiding in the pure land take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the power of their prayers, not through the force of karma and afflictions.

If the bodhisattvas in the pure land take rebirth in cyclic existence due to their karma and afflictions, then why would they want to go there in the first place? What is the purpose of going to the pure land since being there is no different from somebody who is not in the pure land, i.e., that person has no control over his rebirth? If bodhisattvas abiding in the pure land take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions, what you are saying is that they also have no control and have no freedom whatsoever.

Student 1: As Khen Rinpoche said, “In the first place, what is the point of going to a pure land as a bodhisattva if he were to take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions?”

My proposal is that the whole idea of a bodhisattva praying to go to a pure land, such as Amitabha pure land, is because it is said that one can quickly become enlightened there by receiving teachings from Amitabha Buddha. So when one has become a buddha in the pure land, one can come back to help sentient beings as a buddha.

I’m not sure whether a bodhisattva will return to cyclic existence as a bodhisattva still or as a buddha. If he returns still as a bodhisattva, in that sense, there is no benefit in going to the pure land. The only reason for going to the pure land is because one wants to become enlightened quickly.

Khen Rinpoche: Going by what you have said, isn’t the path to enlightenment quicker when one is abiding in cyclic existence. Does it not take longer to be enlightened in the pure land?

Student 1: Is that so?

Khen Rinpoche: You don’t think so?

Isn’t it the case that the bodhisattva will achieve enlightenment more quickly by being in a samsaric environment rather than being in a pure land. Here the person in question is a bodhisattva.

Student 1: I’m not sure.

Khen Rinpoche: There is a stronger renunciation when one is abiding in a samsaric environment. Due to the force of that stronger renunciation, the compassion that is generated is also much stronger.

Student 1: I don't think that is necessarily the case.

Khen Rinpoche: Isn't there more suffering here?

Student 1: I think it would depend on the bodhisattva practitioner because everybody has a slightly different path and a different inclination.

Khen Rinpoche: If you think about this, according to your logic, the people who go to the pure land are of lesser faculties.

Student 1: Is that a statement of fact?

We are talking here about whether the bodhisattva is remaining in cyclic existence or choosing to go to a pure land. Are we forgetting that by definition as a bodhisattva, he has already renounced self-cherishing? He cherishes others on the basis of the recognition of the suffering of others and by recalling the kindness of others. That is why he wants to practise.

I'm not sure whether it is the case that it is easier to practise here or in the pure land. It depends on his mind. He may decide that maybe for him as a practitioner, "It is better that I go to the pure land quickly, meet Amitabha Buddha and become enlightened and then come back as a buddha." Otherwise, what is the purpose of pure land practice? I'm just wondering.

Student 1: Is it a statement of fact that a pure land practice is only for practitioners of lesser faculties? What I'm hearing now is that only practitioners of lesser faculties engage in pure land practice. Am I misunderstanding this?

Khen Rinpoche: The main point is this: You are saying that one can achieve enlightenment more quickly in a pure land. What I am saying is that one will achieve enlightenment more quickly in a samsaric environment. That is the difference in our views.

Which path will lead to the quicker achievement of enlightenment? It doesn't matter whether one is a bodhisattva or not. But which practitioner will achieve enlightenment faster?

Student 1: I'm no longer sure. If Khen Rinpoche says that one can achieve enlightenment faster in cyclic existence, then that must be the correct answer! But my viewpoint is based on what I've heard in the past. During Vesak Day, Khen Rinpoche gives instructions on how to go to a pure land and why people should try to go to a pure land.

Khen Rinpoche: I said (enlightenment can be achieved) faster in the pure land?

Student 1: No, you didn't say that. But I am asking what is the purpose of the pure land practice is? We know that there is no suffering there.

Khen Rinpoche: What was the original point? What were you trying to put across?

Student 1: The original point was that Khen Rinpoche was asking, “Do bodhisattvas take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions?” The ordinary bodhisattvas still have afflictions but the bodhisattva superiors on the eighth ground do not any afflictions.

Khen Rinpoche: It is stated clearly that there is no true suffering in the pure land. I guess then that probably you would have to say that there are no true origins.

If you say that the people in the pure land have true suffering, it follows that their aggregates, i.e., whatever body they have, is necessarily true suffering. If that is the case, then it is in the nature of suffering. If it is in the nature of suffering, it follows then that there is no difference between the bodies of those people in pure land and the bodies that we have.

Student 1: Agreed.

Khen Rinpoche: As a practitioner, **it does make** a big difference going to a pure land as there is no suffering there. There is suffering here in samsara. Because there is no suffering there but there is so much suffering here, renunciation will be generated more quickly here. It is more difficult to generate renunciation in a pure land.

Student 1: Granted. But he is not going to the pure land as an ordinary practitioner. He is going as a bodhisattva.

I have a question then. How does a bodhisattva end up in a pure land? Because I thought a bodhisattva is practising for full enlightenment. If the argument is that it is better for him to practise in samsara—it is a faster way of becoming fully enlightened in samsara—how come this poor bodhisattva ended up in a pure land?

Is it the way he dedicated his prayers and then something went wrong so that he ended up in a pure land where his ability to gain full enlightenment for the benefit of others is going to be delayed. This is what I’m getting from this discussion.

Khen Rinpoche: It is clear that there are ordinary beings, i.e., non-bodhisattvas, who take rebirth in a pure land. It is also clear that there are ordinary bodhisattvas who take rebirth in a pure land.

If there are ordinary bodhisattvas who take rebirth in pure land, then we need to ask the question you asked—why did they end up in the pure land? Why did they go there?

To take rebirth in a pure land, first, you need a very strong yearning to be reborn there. Based on that, you need to make very strong aspirational prayers. Then maybe you will end up there. But certainly you don’t end up there by accident. The point is that you end up in a pure land through full intention.

Student 1: Noted. I accept that. That is exactly my point.

Khen Rinpoche: If it is quicker to achieve enlightenment in samsara than to achieve

enlightenment in a pure land, why do bodhisattvas want to go to a pure land?

Student 1: Exactly! That is my question. They end up there because they aspire to do so and by make strong prayers.

Khen Rinpoche: Why?

Student 1: We are going around in circles. Khen Rinpoche, that was your question to us!

Khen Rinpoche: If you think about it, these bodhisattvas go to the pure land because of their fear of the suffering in cyclic existence. So what is the implication of that?

Student 1: The implication is that they chickened out! They got scared. I don't think they gave up their bodhicitta but they got scared of the hard work involved. I mean even Chenrezig got scared. So it is not a big deal to feel scared.

It is natural to feel that level of fear. In that sense, it sounds like these bodhisattvas lost their courage to work for sentient beings but that doesn't mean that they gave up their bodhicitta. They got scared because they realised how much hard work is involved but they still want to work for sentient beings. Therefore, they pray to go to a pure land instead. Is that what Khen Rinpoche is saying?

In the pure land, they are still bodhisattvas. That means by definition as a bodhisattva, they are still working for the benefit of sentient beings. So maybe going to a pure land may be an easier way of becoming enlightened for the benefit of sentient beings.

Khen Rinpoche: Probably, the bodhisattvas who pray for and end up in a pure land are those who are afraid of being sucked in into the sufferings of cyclic existence and then coming under the control of karma and afflictions. They are afraid of that, so they pray to go to the pure land. But I guess their goal remains the same, i.e., to achieve enlightenment.

Student 1: I have a related question. I am wondering whether they could have ended up in the pure land not necessarily because they prayed for it, but because of the power of their practice.

The reason I'm saying this is I'm recalling the story of Potawa, one of the composers of these mind-training texts. I may have remembered the story incorrectly but apparently, it was said that he prayed day and night to go to the hell realms to rescue the hell beings there. But as he was dying, he complained to his attendant, "I prayed so hard my entire life to go to the hell realms to help hell beings but all I can see now are the dakas and dakinis around me." That was due to the sheer power of his bodhicitta and his practice.

So due to the positive nature of his actions and his thoughts, although he prayed to go to the hell realms, the visions he had when he was dying was of all the dakas and dakinis coming to bring him, presumably, to a pure land.

So I am just wondering whether another way of ending up in the pure land is not merely praying for it but because of certain practices that one had done, one automatically ends up in there. I am not sure if it relates to this discussion.

Khen Rinpoche: I don't know.

Student 1: We are not talking only about the speed of gaining enlightenment but the *purpose* of a bodhisattva to actively make prayers to go to a pure land. In the case of Potowa, he did not pray for that.

Khen Rinpoche: It is stated very clearly in the teachings that for ordinary beings to be reborn in the Amitabha pure land, you need to do the following:

- You need the single-pointed yearning to go there.
- You have to bring to mind over and over again Amitabha Buddha and his pure land.
- You need to make continuous aspirational prayers to go there.

There is the account that you mentioned but I think that account is spoken of in the context of the benefits of generating bodhicitta. It illustrates how beneficial generating bodhicitta is. The stronger the bodhicitta, the more merit you accumulate. Likewise, the stronger the bodhicitta, the further away one is from the lower realms. One is not going to end up in the lower realms. Because of the vast accumulation of merit, instead it could result in a rebirth in a pure land.

Among the historical accounts one finds in the teachings, there are many such examples that go against the general course of things. They do occur and we should think why that is so.

So, generally speaking, for an ordinary person to be reborn in the pure land, the above prerequisites must come together.

In Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha, the Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*, it is stated that one achieves the path of seeing for the very first time on the basis of a desire realm body. I am not sure whether this position is necessarily an assertion of Hinayana tenets since the *Abhidharmakosha* is a text of Hinayana tenets.

In order to generate the path of seeing for the very first time in one's existence since beginningless time, one needs very strong renunciation. As such, it is said that the initial achievement of the path of seeing must be accomplished on the basis of a desire realm body.

It is also mentioned clearly in the *Abhidharmakosha* that when one is already on the level of the supreme mundane quality of the path of preparation, one will not take rebirth in the form or formless realms because the transition from the level of the supreme mundane quality of the path of preparation to the path of seeing occurs within one meditative equipoise.

But prior to that, on the preceding levels of the path of preparation, i.e., heat, peak and forbearance, there are individuals who take rebirth in the form or formless

realms.

Gathering all this information together, does it mean that those who are not superiors yet in the pure land have to take rebirth in the desire realm before they can achieve the path of seeing for the first time since there is not much disenchantment with cyclic existence in the pure land?

If one was to say “yes,” it follows then that one cannot achieve enlightenment in the pure land. There is no achievement of enlightenment when one is in the pure land because one still has to get a rebirth in the desire realms.

There are two views pertaining to this issue:

- One view quotes what Vasubandhu had said in his *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*—the position that one cannot achieve enlightenment in the pure land.
- But there are other masters who said that once one gets to a pure land, one will definitely achieve enlightenment there.

So there is a position that asserts that when one takes rebirth in a pure land, one has no negativities and suffering. One will never have to take rebirth in cyclic existence again due to the force of karma and afflictions because of the power of the basis, i.e., the kind of rebirth that one has.

In the commentary on the Amitabha Buddha’s pure land, it is said that beings in Amitabha Buddha’s pure land can only take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the force of their prayers. The people in the pure land who actually make strong prayers to be reborn in cyclic existence are probably the bodhisattvas because only they have the courage to aspire to that in order to work for sentient beings.

Student 1: Earlier you mentioned that one of the reasons that bodhisattvas end up in the pure land is because they were scared by the suffering in cyclic existence. They thought, “At least if I go to a pure land, I can become enlightened there.”

But here now, you are saying that these bodhisattvas are the ones who are likely to make strong prayers to return to cyclic existence. So I am trying to clarify. Is that because of the power of the practice that they do in the pure land? There must be a reason why they somehow became less scared. Something must have happened to this bodhisattva who got scared so he prayed to go to the pure land. But what happened to this bodhisattva’s practice in the pure land? He doesn’t have suffering, he doesn’t have afflictions, he doesn’t have karma now and yet he can make strong prayers to come back so something must have happened to transform his practice up in pure land.

Khen Rinpoche: We are discussing the possibilities here. We are not saying that it is definitely 100 per cent like this or that.

The teachings clearly state that there are people in the pure land who pray to come down. They take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the power of their prayers. It is also clear that those who go to the pure land do so out of fear. However, there are people who are coming down from the pure land. The question is, “Why are they

coming down?”

It is not possible to make prayers when one is in the pure land to return to cyclic existence when one does not have the courage, a strong motivation and strong compassion. In the first place, those who don't have strong courage and compassion would not have such aspirations. So we are pondering about this.

What other answer can there be besides saying that they see that it takes a longer time to achieve enlightenment in the pure land? They see that by taking rebirth in a samsaric environment, their disenchantment with samsara will be stronger and their bodhicitta will be stronger. If their bodhicitta is stronger, won't they achieve enlightenment more quickly? I think this is the reason for them making prayers to get out of the pure land.

Student 1: Thank you very much, Khen Rinpoche. That makes sense to me.

Student 2: For the ordinary bodhisattvas from the pure land who pray to take rebirth in cyclic existence, since that rebirth is not due to karma and afflictions, I am wondering what kind of aggregates they will have. It is not a mental body. It is not true suffering. What kind of aggregates will they be?

Khen Rinpoche: Good question! Anybody has the answer? All the scholars, please come up and answer this question.

The question is, “When you come back from the pure land to samsara, what kind of body do you have?”

Khen Rinpoche: Is the body of the bodhisattva from the pure land who has taken rebirth in this world a true suffering like our bodies?

Student 1: It is said that certain of our teachers come down from the pure land to help us, but they manifest experiencing illness, aging and so forth. That is why I said that theirs is not a fully qualified true suffering body.

Khen Rinpoche: There is no qualm with regard to the bodhisattva superiors. That is quite obvious.

We are talking about ordinary bodhisattvas in the pure land who end up in the desire realms. What kind of body do they have? Is it true suffering or not? Just answer yes or no.

The body of this individual is not a mental body. What other options are left? Is it not true suffering? There are no other options. But if you say it is true suffering, what are the implications?

(Responses from students are inaudible).

The implication is that if you were to say that the body of this ordinary bodhisattva who has just descended from the pure land is true suffering, that must be the result of karma and afflictions since true suffering is the result of karma and afflictions. It

follows then that there is karma and afflictions in the continuum of that bodhisattva in the pure land.

(Comments from students are inaudible).

Student 3: In the first place, there wasn't any explanation of how an ordinary person or ordinary bodhisattva who has ended up in the pure land does not possess karma and afflictions. He has not practised abandoning these yet when he ended up in the pure land, it is not logical to me that his karma and afflictions automatically disappeared.

Khen Rinpoche: We are not saying that their karma and afflictions have been abandoned. The teachings mentioned that the afflictions of the person in the pure land are stopped simply by virtue of the power of the pure land itself, i.e., the power of the place.

Student 3: That means they still can be in possession of the karma and afflictions? Therefore when they come back, those karma and afflictions will manifest as true suffering.

Khen Rinpoche: They do not manifest in the pure land.

Student 3: They do not manifest in pure land but they manifest back here in samsara. They are stopped in the pure land but they still possess karma and afflictions. Somewhere in their continuum, they still possess karma and afflictions.

Khen Rinpoche: If you think of the twelve links of dependent origination, in order to get the result of contaminated aggregates, true suffering, three actualising factors must be present—craving, grasping and potential existence. If these are not manifest, you cannot actualise the result. If the actualising factors are not manifest, then the actualising karma doesn't come into being. Then you cannot have this result.

Student 3: Do they possess these actualising factors in their continuum while they are in the pure land? Even though they are stopped, do they possess these actualising factors? If they cannot manifest in the pure land, there is no way they can take rebirth in cyclic existence. The same reasoning applies.

Khen Rinpoche: That is why it is said that rebirth from the pure land into cyclic existence is *not* due to the force of karma and afflictions. We are now trying to ascertain whether rebirth from the pure land to the desire realms is due to karma and afflictions.

Student 3: It is very clear it is not due to karma and afflictions. It is due to the power of their prayers.

Khen Rinpoche: If it is not due to karma and afflictions, you have only one answer left—that it is due to the power of their prayers.

Student 3: So, there is a body that is formed due to the power of their prayers. This is

the first time I am hearing this.

Khen Rinpoche: This is why we have this qualm: If you take rebirth from the pure land, you become a human being. Is that human body that you have true suffering or not?

Student 2: No it is not. You mean it is true suffering due to their prayers? He prays, “I want to have true suffering.” That is the only way because (the actualising factors) cannot manifest. I don’t see any other possibilities.

Khen Rinpoche: Why is the body-mind complex that we have called contaminated appropriated aggregates? The only reason is because it is due to karma and afflictions. That is why they are called suffering aggregates.

If one takes rebirth as a human being from the pure land, that rebirth is not due to the force of karma and afflictions. That rebirth is due to the force of prayers. Then you have to say that this human body is not true suffering.

Student 4: That is exactly what I thought! When rinpoches take rebirth, are those bodies true suffering? I think not.

Khen Rinpoche: If the guru in question is in reality a buddha, then there is no need to talk about this. Or if he is in reality a bodhisattva superior, there is also no need to say that it is not due to karma and afflictions.

Here what we are discussing is if the person in question is an ordinary person, not a superior.

It is mentioned in the teachings on the stages of clear realisations, the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, bodhisattva superiors can take on the aspect of an animal body but that is not an actual animal body.

Can we then extend this line of reasoning or explanation to ordinary beings? In the teachings of correctly devoting to the virtuous friend, it is said that from your side, you have to look at the virtuous friend as not being sick but that he is only showing the aspect of being sick.

If the virtuous friend in question is really a buddha or bodhisattva superior, then there is meaning to saying they are showing such aspects. But if the person is an ordinary being, there is no meaning to saying they are showing the ordinary aspect of being sick because he really is sick. He is sick and he is dying.

In the Buddha’s life story, he was born, then he aged and passed away. From the Mahayana’s perspective, it is said that the Buddha did not die but manifested passing away.

Student 4: I have heard that bodhisattvas in the pure land pray to be reborn in our world because with the aggregates of a human body, it makes easier for them to practise tantra and achieve enlightenment in one lifetime.

I have not heard of them praying to be reborn here because it is easier to develop renunciation quickly. I guess the reason could be that, in order for them to be reborn as bodhisattvas in the pure land, they would have bodhicitta already, which means that they would have already developed renunciation. Why do they still pray to be reborn here to develop renunciation more quickly?

Khen Rinpoche: There is a difference in the strength of the renunciation and compassion that they generate.

Shakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Buddha, prior to achieving enlightenment, were both bodhisattvas. But who achieved enlightenment earlier? It was Shakyamuni Buddha. Why? It was said that his compassion was stronger so Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment before Maitreya Buddha. But when both of them were bodhisattvas, who became a bodhisattva first? It was Maitreya because Maitreya generated bodhicitta much earlier before Shakyamuni Buddha. In the end however, Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment earlier than Maitreya Buddha because of the strength of the bodhicitta that Shakyamuni Buddha generated while he was on the path.

The point is that there is a difference in the strength of the renunciation and bodhicitta in the mind of the person who is in the pure land compared to the mind of the person who is in this world. Because of that difference, there is a difference in the strength of the bodhicitta and therefore a difference in the speed of achieving enlightenment.

Khen Rinpoche: What we discussed today is not my final answer. It is just a discussion for you to get more ideas. That is all. You can think more about this. I don't have the exact answer. But it is good to think more about these points.

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