Buddhahood and buddha bodies

by John Makransky

“Buddhahood” (buddhatvam) refers to the unique attainment of buddhas that distinguishes them from all other kinds of holy being. Buddhahood constitutes the fullest possible realization of ultimate reality, total freedom from all that obscures it, together with all qualities that flow from such a realization. Buddhahood has been described in two closely related ways: in terms of its distinctive characteristics, and in terms of buddha “bodies.”

Characteristics of Buddhahood

Early Buddhist texts ascribe qualities to Gotama Buddha that distinguish him from all other arhats (those who have realized nirvana) and which render him the supreme teacher of the world. His realization of enlightenment included three types of knowledge: vast knowledge of his own past lives, vast knowledge of others’ rebirth in accord with their karmic patterns of thought and action, and complete eradication within his own mind of the inmost causes of suffering and limitation.
He was said to possess ten unmatched powers of penetrating awareness, four peerless forms of fearlessness, supreme compassion for all beings. His body was endowed with thirty-two marks of a supreme person (mahapurusa), the fruit of immeasurable virtue from previous lives (Digha Nikaya 3.142-179). As the outflow of his enlightenment he also possessed supernormal powers (rddhis) superior to those of others, such as the power to project multiple physical forms of diverse kinds (nirmanas), to control physical phenomena, to know others’ minds and capacities, to perceive directly over great distances and time, and to know and skillfully communicate the freedom of nirvana (Majjhima Nikaya 1.69-73, Makransky 26-27). Sakyamuni’s enlightened qualities exemplify those possessed by all prior buddhas and those to come, qualities that enable each buddha to reintroduce the dharma to the world in each age.

**Buddha bodies (kayas)**

The Indic term kaya refers to the physical body of a living being. It therefore carries the secondary meaning of a collection or aggregate of parts. In Buddhist texts over time, kaya came to include a third meaning, base or substratum, since one’s body is the base of many qualities. The term also
came to connote the embodiment of ultimate truth in enlightened knowledge and activity.

For early Buddhist traditions, Sakyamuni’s body with thirty-two special marks constituted his primary physical expression of enlightenment. But his power to manifest himself to others extended beyond the confines of his physical body, since he created a “mind-made” body (manomayakaya) to teach his deceased mother in a heaven, and occasionally projected copies of his body, or created diverse forms, to carry out enlightened activities (nirmanas). All such manifest forms were referred to as rupakaya, the embodiment (kaya) of the Buddha in forms (rupa).

Of special importance was the dharma, the truths that the Buddha had realized and taught, encapsulated in the four noble truths, the very source of the charismatic power expressed through his physical body and teaching. Metaphorically, the dharma itself was understood as his essential being, his very body. So a scripture says that the Buddha instructed his disciples, when asked their family lineage, to reply, “I am a true son of the Buddha, born of his mouth, born of dharma, created by the dharma, an heir of the dharma. Why? Because buddhas are those whose body is dharma (dharmakaya),…” (Digha Nikaya 3.84).
After the Buddha’s physical death, the distinction between his dharma body (dharmakaya) and his form body (rupakaya) grounded two legacies of communal practice (Reynolds 1977, p. 376). “Body of dharma” (dharmakaya) referred especially to the corpus of teachings the Buddha bequeathed to his monastic sangha, whose institutional life centered on the recitation, study, and practice of them. On the other hand, the relics from the cremation of the Buddha’s physical body (rupakaya) were placed in reliquary mounds (stupas) at which laity (and probably also monks and nuns) practiced ritual forms of reverence for the Buddha modeled on forms of devotion shown to him during his lifetime.

In Theravada and Sarvastivada traditions dharmakaya also referred to the Buddha’s supra-mundane realizations, his powers of awareness, fearlessness, compassion and skillful means as noted in the prior section. Here dharmakaya refers to the Buddha’s “body of dharma(s),” where dharmas are pure qualities of enlightened mind (Makransky p. 27).

Scholastics of those schools maintained that the Buddha’s final nirvana at his physical death was an unconditioned attainment, a total passing away from the conditioned world of beings. Yet many practices of Buddhist communities seem to have functioned to mediate the power of the Buddha’s nirvanic attainment to the world long after he was physically gone.
Reliquary mounds containing relics of the Buddha (stupas), when ritually consecrated, “came alive” for devotees with the presence of the Buddha, representing the Buddha not only as the field of merit for offerings, but as a continuing source of salvific power for the world (Strong p. 115). Thus, many stories tell of Buddhist devotees who witnessed miraculous events or had spontaneous visions of the Buddha at stupas. The distribution of the Buddha’s relics among many stupas over time cosmologized the Buddha, ritually rendering the power of his dharmakaya (his nirvanic attainment) pervasively present to the world through his rupakaya (physical embodiment) in many stupas (Strong 119). Statues and paintings of the Buddha had similar ritual functions, while also serving as support for meditation practices that vividly brought to mind the qualities of the Buddha while visualizing his physical form (buddhanusmr̥ti). Accomplished meditators were said to have visions and dreams of the Buddha, and to experience the Buddha’s qualities and powers as vividly present in their world. All such ritual and yogic practices functioned to render the salvific power of his nirvana, even after he was physically gone, a continuing presence in the samsaric world.

Several schools deriving from Mahasanghika tradition appear to have given doctrinal expression to these patterns of understanding. They asserted
that the Buddha was wholly supra-mundane, that his salvific power was all-
pervasive, and that his body that had perished at the age of eighty was just a
mind-made (manomaya) or illusory creation (nirmana), not his real body.
Rather, his real body was pure and limitless, its life endless. Theravada and
Sarvastivada scholastics had claimed that the Buddha’s final nirvana had
destroyed the sole creative cause of his samsaric experience (defiled karma),
resulting in a final nirvana beyond creation or conditionality. But the
Mahasangikas, by asserting that the Buddha’s rupakaya was pure and
limitless, seemed to be saying that his long bodhisattva practice of prior lives
had not only destroyed the impure causes of his samsara, but functioned as
pure creative cause for his nirvanic attainment to embody itself limitlessly
for beings. Along similar lines, the Saddharmapundarika (Lotus sutra), an
early Mahayana scripture, declared the Buddha’s life and salvific activity to
span innumerable eons, beyond his apparent physical death.

This understanding of a buddha’s nirvana as not just the cessation of
defilement but also the manifestation of vast salvific power was developed
in a wide range of Mahayana scriptures of early centuries CE. The centrality
of bodhisattvas in Mahayana sutras, each of whom vows to become a
buddha, supported a new Buddhist cosmology of multiple buddhas
simultaneously active throughout the universe. Each such buddha yields
enlightened power within his own field of salvific activity for the beings karmically connected to him. On the path to buddhahood, therefore, bodhisattvas vow to “purify” their fields, by collecting immeasurable amounts of merit and wisdom (as pure creative causes for their buddha fields), by training other bodhisattvas in similar practices, and by transferring their merit to other beings so they may be reborn in such fields (Williams pp. 224-227). The purest such fields are heavenly domains of buddhas of infinite radiance, power, and incalculable lifespan, such as Amitabha or Akshobhya, buddhas whose pure fields (or “pure lands”) consist of jewelled palaces and radiant natural scenes, where all conditions are perfect for communicating and realizing enlightenment. Those born near such a celestial buddha, either by the power of their own practice or by faith in the power of such a buddha, make quick progress to enlightenment. Late fourth century CE Mahayana treatises, such as the Mahayanasutramalakara and Abhisamayalamkara, created a new vocabulary for such celestial buddhas, referring to them as sambhogakaya, the perfect embodiment (kaya) of buddhahood for supreme communal enjoyment (sambhoga) of dharma (Nagao pp. 107-112).

These Mahayana understandings developed within a nexus of other developing doctrines. Prajnaparamita (Perfecton of Wisdom) sutras and
early Madhyamaka treatises declared all phenomena to be empty of substantial, independent existence (svabhavasunya), hence illusory. When bodhisattvas attain direct knowledge of that truth, they realize that all things in their intrinsic emptiness have always been in nirvanic peace, that samsara is undivided from nirvana. Through such wisdom, the bodhisattva learns to embody the freedom and power of nirvana while continuing to act skillfully within samsara for the sake of others. When this bodhisattva path of wisdom and skillful means is fully accomplished, its simultaneous participation in samsara and nirvana becomes the essential realization of buddhahood. This is referred in Yogacara and later Madhyamka treatises as a buddha’s “unrestricted nirvana” (apratisthita-nirvana), unrestricted because it is bound neither to samsara nor to a merely quiescent nirvana, but possessed of limitless and spontaneous activity, all-pervasive and eternal, radiating its power to beings throughout all existence, drawing them toward enlightenment (Makransky pp. 85-87).

In the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, the term dharmata (literally “thinghood”) refers to the real nature of things, undivided in their emptiness yet diverse in their appearance. In treatises that formalized the concept of the buddhas’ unrestricted nirvana, the dharmata of all things as the limitless field of the buddhas’ enlightened knowledge and power came to be referred
to as dharmakaya, now meaning the buddhas’ “embodiment of dharmata” (of ultimate reality) (Makransky pp. 34-37, 199-201). Dharmakaya, as the non-dual awareness of the emptiness of all things is undifferentiated among buddhas, yet serves as the basis for diverse manifestations. It is therefore also etymologized as the undivided basis (kaya) of all the buddha qualities (dharmas). A synonym for it in such treatises was svabhavikakaya, meaning the buddhas’ embodiment (kaya) of the intrinsic nature (svabhava) of things.

The celestial sambhogakaya buddhas, then, represent the primary manifestation of dharmakaya, perfectly embodying the non-duality of appearance (rupa) and emptiness (dharma). For this reason, the sensory phenomena of sambhogakaya pure fields -- gentle breezes, flowing rivers, even the birds -- continually disclose the nirvanic nature of things to the bodhisattva assemblies arrayed there.

But formulatcrs of the buddhas’ unrestricted nirvana, as noted above, understood the dharmakaya’s salvific activity to radiate to beings of all realms, not just to those in pure buddha fields. Such all-pervasive buddha activity is carried out by innumerable manifestations within the empty, illusory, worlds of beings. In Yogacara and later Madhyamaka treatises, the limitlessly diverse ways that buddhahood was said to manifest in Mahayana scriptures came to be classified under the term nirmanakaya, meaning
buddhahood embodied (kaya) in diverse, illusory manifestations (nirmana). As such, nirmanakaya encompasses three broad categories. First, since the world itself in its empty, illusory nature is undivided from nirvana, any aspect of the world has the potential to disclose the essence of buddhahood, to function as nirmanakaya, when a person’s mind becomes pure enough to notice. Secondly, buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas have great power to project illusory replicas and visionary forms to beings (nirmanas) to help guide them toward enlightenment. Such illusory projections further support the disclosure of all things as illusory appearances of empty reality. Thirdly, all sorts of beings who serve to communicate the buddhas’ truths function as agents of buddha activity, hence as nirmanakaya, from supreme human paradigms like Sakyamuni to the innumerable bodhisattvas of Mahayana scriptures who carry out much of the Buddha’s teaching and salvific activity, and who appear in all walks of life and as all types of beings.

Thus developed the basic Mahayana doctrine of three buddha kayas: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya which informed the buddhalogies that developed throughout Asia, contributing to the Hua yen, T’ien tai, Chen-yen, Ch’an and Ching t’u traditions of China, thence Korea and Japan, and to all Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Some scholars, seeking to analyze the relationship between transcendental and phenomenal aspects of
buddhahood, divided those three kayas into four. So Hsuan tsang in seventh century China distinguished two aspects of sambhogakaya, while Haribhadra in eighth century India divided dharmakaya in two by reference to conditioned and unconditioned aspects (Makransky 216-218).

In Indian Yogacara and later Madhyamaka treatises, the three kaya doctrine was associated with a developmental model of path: Buddhahood is to be attained by the radical transformation of all aspects of a person’s defiled consciousness into buddha kayas and wisdoms. Mahayana texts whose central teaching was buddha nature (tathagatagarbha), on the other hand, emphasized a discovery model of path: Buddha kayas manifest automatically as the mind is purified, for the very essence of mind (buddha nature) is already replete with their qualities (Nagao pp. 115-117).

Tantric Buddhist traditions of India, East Asia and Tibet drew upon both such models. The teaching of buddha nature undergirds the “three mysteries” uncovered by tantric praxis, through which the practitioner discovers that her body, speech and mind are undivided from those of the buddhas, which are one with the three kayas. Tantric traditions have also drawn upon Yogacara and Madhyamaka models of transformation to construct homologies expressed in mandalas. Indian and Tibetan praxis of highest yoga tantras engages four energy centers in the body, which frame
correspondences between four-fold aspects of the unenlightened person, four-fold aspects of path that ultimately transforms them, and four resultant buddha kayas, all of which take visual expression in the four directions of the mandala. Within such a system, a fourth kaya representing highest tantric attainment is added to the prior three kayas, and is designated by terms such as sahaja-kaya, “embodiment of co-presence (of nirvana and samsara),” or mahasukha-kaya, “embodiment of great bliss,” (the tantrically embodied bliss of non-dual wisdom and means).

Japanese Pure Land traditions (Jodoshu, Jodo Shinshu) have emphasized the transcendental power of buddhahood embodied in the sambhogakaya Amitabha. Because this is the period of the dharma’s degeneration (mappo), it is argued, people are no longer able to accomplish the path through their own power but must rely upon the buddha Amitabha whose power to take the devotee into his pure field at death is received in faith through recitation of his name (nembutsu). Zen traditions, on the other hand, based upon the doctrine of buddha nature, have emphasized the immanence and immediacy of enlightenment. Through Zen practice, it is said, buddhahood complete with all kayas is to be discovered intimately within one’s present mind, body, world. So the Japanese eighteenth century
Zen teacher Hakuin wrote, “This very place, the pure lotus land; this very body, the buddha body.”
Bibliography


