The Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya

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What are the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya? Patriarch Linji said: “The pure light of mind in a single thought is the dharmakāya Buddha; the non-discriminating light of mind in a single thought is the sambhogakāya Buddha; and the non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought is the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. The three bodies—the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya—are fully inherent in our intrinsic nature; there is no need to seek them elsewhere.”

The pure light of mind in a single thought means the spiritually aware knowing that is utterly clear, unlike wood or stone, when not a single thought arises. So long as even one thought remains, it is not pure. Likewise, a thought of Buddha or a mind that recites mantras is not pure. Only when the mind that recites and the mantra being recited both fall away at once, and subject and object are both gone, is there the pure light of mind in a single thought. This is the dharmakāya. When we practice the Dharma, we constantly speak of realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature; it is this intrinsic nature that we see.

The non-discriminating light of mind in a single thought is the sambhogakāya Buddha. The non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought is the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. Wherein lies the distinction between this non-discriminating light of mind and non-differentiating light of mind? Do not discrimination and differentiation mean the same thing? Why, then, is the non-discriminating light of mind the sambhogakāya Buddha, while the non-differentiating light of mind is the nirmāṇakāya Buddha? Because the sambhogakāya Buddha is a light-body, a single expanse of radiance with no other forms or appearances; how could there be differentiating appearances? Thus, the non-discriminating light of mind in a single thought is the sambhogakāya Buddha.

To realize the sambhogakāya Buddha at the fruition stage, one must engage compassion and wisdom in tandem, liberate sentient beings extensively, and accumulate merit and virtue. After we realize our intrinsic nature, great compassion naturally wells up within us. Once awakened, we know that all the phenomena of the world are false, unreal, and illusory—unobtainable like the moon's reflection in water. We therefore cease creating karma and transcend the wheel of suffering.

But sentient beings do not know this. Amid the vastness of karmic consciousness, they continually create karma and undergo retribution, with no means of escaping suffering. Great compassion naturally wells up, and one gives rise to great vows to liberate sentient beings extensively. This great compassion arises from great wisdom; without wisdom, great compassion cannot arise, and without great wisdom one cannot liberate sentient beings. To liberate them, one must know their capacities in order to teach the Dharma suited to them. Thus, liberating sentient beings requires compassion and wisdom to operate together; merely understanding some theory will not accomplish it. When merit and virtue are complete, the sambhogakāya one realizes is the great luminous sambhogakāya, the virtue of fruition.

For example, when Sudhana saw Maitreya Buddha—in the Inner Court of Tuṣita, where we are to go and where Maitreya Bodhisattva dwells—Maitreya Buddha said to Sudhana: "You have attained fundamental wisdom. Fundamental wisdom is the intrinsic nature realized through direct realization. But you have not attained differentiated wisdom."

Differentiated wisdom is differentiated wisdom acquired subsequently. It is the great wisdom attained through eliminating dust-like delusions and subtle ignorance in the course of liberating sentient beings. It enables one to teach sentient beings the Dharma appropriate to their differing capacities and habitual tendencies, and to ferry them out of the sea of suffering. You do not yet possess this differentiated wisdom. You must still temper yourself in the world and liberate sentient beings extensively before it can be perfected. When the merit of liberating sentient beings is complete, you will realize a sambhogakāya like mine. This violet-gold body that I, Maitreya Buddha, have attained arose suddenly through extensively liberating sentient beings!"

The sambhogakāya realized by anyone is a light-body and therefore non-discriminating. The nirmāṇakāya is otherwise: it has appearances, and wherever there are appearances, there are differences. Men and women, young and old, plants, trees, fish, insects, the sun, moon, heaven, and earth all differ.

Since there are differences, why is the non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought called the nirmāṇakāya Buddha? Although appearances differ, the

fundamental body—the dharmakāya—from which all appearances arise is without differentiation. All sentient beings are Buddhas because all possess Buddha-nature. All the scenes of every world are formed and manifested by our Buddha-nature.

Whether a state is good or bad, since it is formed and manifested by Buddha-nature, it is equally without duality. Therefore, whether it is our Sahā world of the five turbidities or the Western Pure Land, all are equal and without distinction. All worldly existents are transformed by our non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought; therefore, all things are nirmāṇakāya Buddhas.

Differences exist at the level of appearances, but the intrinsic substance that gives rise to all appearances is equal. Thus, the non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought is the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. Once this principle is fully understood, one will no longer wonder how the seemingly synonymous non-discriminating light of mind and non-differentiating light of mind can be, respectively, both the sambhogakāya and the nirmāṇakāya.

Once we recognize the pure light of mind in a single thought without the slightest doubt, we see our true nature immediately. There is no need to seek it anywhere; it is shining right before your face. The pure light of mind in a single thought is when the sense faculties and their objects fall away: while practicing the Dharma, the mind that recites and the mantra being held suddenly fall away together, and body, mind, and world all dissolve. Yet amid this cessation, there is not annihilation; rather, spiritually aware knowing, utterly clear and distinct, manifests. This knowing is our intrinsic nature; it is also the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya.

As for truly realizing countless transformation bodies, being able to manifest bodies throughout the ten directions and liberate countless sentient beings, with transformations like those in Investiture of the Gods, this requires realization of the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment. That is, even the most exceedingly subtle deluded thoughts must be completely eliminated. Our deluded mind and deluded thoughts include coarse delusions, subtle delusions, very subtle delusions, and extremely subtle delusions.

The extremely subtle are called the subtle continuous stream. They are like a fine current of water: you see it as motionless, but it is actually moving. The movement beneath the surface is too swift and intense, so it appears motionless instead. Once this too is severed and there is no movement, one can realize millions upon millions of transformation bodies, liberate countless sentient beings, and exercise great wondrous functioning.

In our cultivation, we must first eliminate the personal-self view and then eliminate the dharma-self view. The personal-self view is the distinction between persons and self. The dharma-self view retains a dharma. What is the dharma-self? Arhats, for

example, know that the physical body and material form are unobtainable and that the world is illusory. To leave suffering and attain happiness, they believe that they should leave this world.

Yet they then give rise to a dharma-self. They believe there is a dharma to cultivate, birth and death to transcend, and nirvāṇa to realize. At the same time, they take the four great elements of Buddha-nature—earth, water, fire, and wind—to be a self.

Our Buddha-nature inherently possesses seven great elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, the faculties, and consciousness. Of these seven great elements, earth, water, fire, and wind are the principal ones. The world is composed of earth, water, fire, and wind, and our bodies too are composed of earth, water, fire, and wind.

Having cultivated the Way and awakened, they no longer cling to the physical body, but instead cling to the elements of Buddha-nature—earth, water, fire, and wind—as a self. They regard these as real and the physical body as false. They do not realize that the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind within Buddha-nature are only partial elements of Buddha-nature, not its entirety—just as the eyes, ears, nose, and tongue are parts of a human being, not the whole body.

They now mistakenly believe that there is some thing that is a self; this is attachment to dharmas, and so they cannot attain the ultimate. The term “element” means that which, as a “seed,” is capable of giving rise to something. For example, when a rice seed is planted, it produces rice; a wheat seed produces wheat. Since our physical body arises from the four great elements, everything in the world is inseparable from these four great elements.

Having been refined through the Buddha Dharma, arhats and pratyekabuddhas know that material appearances arising from the four great elements are false and should not be grasped. Yet they mistakenly take the four great elements to be a real self. They do not realize that wherever there is abiding attachment, there is no reality. Moreover, the four great elements are only partial elements of Buddha-nature, not its entirety. Thus, they have not truly seen their nature and were reproached by the Buddha as scorched sprouts and rotten seeds.

In our cultivation, we must neither falsely cling to the four great elements as a self nor abide in Buddha-nature. The moment there is any abiding, one falls into a fixed pattern. Therefore, one who truly becomes a Buddha has not even the shadow of a Buddha. If you say, “I have become a Buddha,” then you have not become a Buddha; you have become a demon. For you still have a foothold, some thing remaining in your breast that has not been emptied away.

Our dharmakāya is like empty space: utterly bare and unstained by a single speck of dust. It has neither the appearance of time nor the appearance of space. Therefore,

in our cultivation we must cut off everything; absolutely no trace of abiding attachment may remain. But to truly eliminate the personal self, one must realize the stage of a seventh-bhūmi bodhisattva.

“Only before the Immovable Ground is the storehouse relinquished” (the Immovable Ground is the eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva); “after the Vajra Path, the maturation consciousness is empty” (the Vajra Path is the tenth-bhūmi bodhisattva). Only after reaching the tenth-bhūmi bodhisattva can the dharma-self be eliminated. Otherwise, one still abides in the dharma-self. Thus it is often said: “Though one may ascend the hundred-foot pole, it is not yet true attainment.”

This means that one still has a foothold while sitting atop the pole. Therefore: “Advance one step beyond the hundred-foot pole, and the whole body appears throughout the worlds of the ten directions.” The worlds of the ten directions are all your body; once even the foothold is removed, the dharma-self is eliminated. Having reached this stage, one has the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment and can transform into countless nirmāṇakāyas. This is how we cultivate.

You always ask, “How far are we from arriving home?” Looking ahead, the road seems immensely long. You think, “Oh no, it is terrible—we are still so very far away!” Inevitably, you lose confidence. But if you look back and compare yourself with the past, seeing your own progress, your mind becomes much more settled.

Therefore, the Buddha, in his great compassion, said: “You sentient beings lack courage and are timid. I will manifest a phantom city for you to stay in and rest. Before you reach the Buddha’s stage, first go to the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss to settle yourselves and rest your feet, or go to Tuṣita Heaven.”

But great-resolve bodhisattvas say: “I will not go anywhere! Until the hells are empty, I vow not to attain Buddhahood. I will liberate every sentient being in hell.” The hells are not truly frightening; once you realize this, you will not fear them. As said above, in the non-differentiating light of mind in a single thought, hells and celestial palaces are alike. What difference is there between beauty and ugliness, pleasure and suffering?

At that time, our master was teaching the Dharma in Beijing. He had two disciples who were not human: one was a fox and the other a python. The fox came first and later introduced the python. They appeared in human form when they came. They said: “We both do good deeds, gathering medicinal herbs and treating people’s illnesses. We never do evil. We wish to learn the Buddha Dharma and cultivate ourselves to attain fruition.”

They told their fellow disciples, “You have obtained human bodies, yet you do not apply yourselves diligently. What a pity! In order to obtain human bodies, we must

cultivate for a very long time before we can manifest in human form and practice the Buddhadharma." One day, when the Master was giving a Dharma talk, he asked them to sit in front, where two seats were still available.

They said, "We dare not come forward! There are celestial foxes in front!" (Foxes from heaven.) They themselves were earth foxes. Later, when our Master returned to the south, they saw him off. At the Yellow River, they said, "We cannot cross the Yellow River. We can accompany you only this far and can go no farther. Master, please take care!" This may sound fantastical to you, like a tale from The Thousand and One Nights, but it is indeed true. Since all sentient beings possess buddha-nature, they too can realize the Way. You must not doubt that something does not exist simply because you have not seen it.

Take our dharmakāya, for example. Some people who do not practice the Dharma, having never seen it, always say that it does not exist. Yet it truly exists. Once everyone cultivates diligently in accordance with the Dharma and realizes it directly for themselves, they will have unwavering faith in it. The dharmakāya—buddha-nature—is truly true emptiness and wondrous presence. It contains the great treasury of all capacities; all sentient beings possess it. It truly exists and is not vague or illusory.

Speaking of true emptiness and wondrous presence, this is true not only of buddha-nature; all things are likewise so.

Take a cup, for example. Its intrinsic nature is empty, because a cup has no independent substance—it does not exist inherently. A glass cup is made of glass, but glass itself has no independent substance: it is produced from mined minerals, and those mineral deposits were formed through geological changes over countless centuries, together with changes in temperature, pressure, and so forth. Thus, none has an independent substance. Like buddha-nature, which has no form that can be seen, this is called true emptiness. Yet although all things lack an independent substance, their provisional appearances are not nonexistent, and they can fully perform their functions. Like the boundless wondrous functioning of buddha-nature, this is called wondrous presence.

As stated above, all things are transformed and brought forth by buddha-nature. Since buddha-nature is true emptiness and wondrous presence, all things are naturally also true emptiness and wondrous presence.

Someone may ask, "Why do humans, formed from the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, have feelings, whereas things composed of the four great elements have no feelings?" The answer is: if one breath does not return, does this physical body still have feelings? This shows that feelings do not reside in the physical body but in spiritual nature.

The distinction people make between human bodies and material objects arises because the mind-capacity of ordinary beings is not expansive. They grasp only a small portion of the four great elements, burrow into this shell of flesh, and take it to be the self. Since they cannot extend throughout all things, they create the distinction between sentient and insentient.

In fact, when a person breathes their last, does this physical body not become just like wood or stone? Where then are its awareness and feelings? Does it not become an insentient thing? When we do the work of cultivation until body, mind, and world all dissolve into emptiness, and realize the vast, boundless true nature that fills the whole of empty space and pervades the dharma realm, we can extend throughout all things, and there is no longer any distinction between sentient and insentient.

The saying, “When Master Shenggong expounded the Dharma, even stubborn stones nodded,” is clear proof of this. Thus, the sun, moon, stars, grasses, trees, forests, and the myriad forms of existence are all manifestations of ourselves. I urge everyone to undertake the work of cultivation without delay. Do not be heedless and indulge in amusement, clinging to sensual pleasures, wealth, and gain while ignoring this great treasury. Do not betray yourselves and come into this world only to depart empty-handed, like entering a mountain of treasures and returning with empty hands. That would be far too regrettable, too unworthy, and too unjust. I hope you will all take this to heart.