



The Buddha

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

Theravada understanding

When Theravadins take refuge in the Buddha, they acknowledge his historical role in communicating the Dharma, and express their respect and gratitude to him. They are also recognizing him as their ultimate teacher and guide, recalling that his life serves as an example that all Buddhists can follow. This Refuge does not entail worshipping the Buddha in any way. The Buddha is seen as a human being and is respected because he succeeded in attaining enlightenment and showed us the way to do so ourselves.

Theravada emphasizes taking refuge in the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. In other words, the Buddha in Theravada refers to the person who founded Buddhism in human history. However, to a certain extent this tradition also understands Refuge in terms of past and future buddhas as well, and in terms of the principle of enlightenment. In this sense, taking refuge in the Buddha also points to honouring the principle of wisdom and enlightenment within each one of us, a principle that is understood to be supremely embodied by the Buddha.

Mahayana understanding

The Mahayana understanding of the Buddha is based on its 'three body' or *Trikaya* doctrine.

The word 'body' as a translation of *kaya* does not mean a physical body; it does not mean that the Buddha had three separate 'bodies' in this sense. Rather, it has the collective meaning the word sometimes has in English in expressions like 'a body of literature' or 'a body of knowledge'. In other words, 'body' here means a collection of qualities and characteristics. Hence the three *kayas* refer to three aspects of buddhahood, or three dimensions of the enlightened mind. These three aspects are:

Dharmakaya: the body of truth

Sambhogakaya: the body of joy or enjoyment

Nirmanakaya: the body of manifestation

The **Nirmanakaya** refers to the physical manifestation of an enlightened being, and in the case of Shakyamuni it refers to the historical Buddha whose life story we learn. From the Mahayana perspective, the Buddha was already enlightened before he was born as Siddhartha, and his decision to take physical form was a voluntary one and not determined karmically as it is for ordinary beings. Buddhas have the power to manifest in any physical form they wish, in any part of the universe and even in several universes



at once. This means that buddhas can manifest as animals to guide animals, as human beings to guide humans and so on, and they may also manifest as the religious teachers of other religions.

The Sambhogakaya refers to the dimension of energy and light, and can be described in two ways. First, it refers to the experience of bliss and joy that comes from experiencing the Dharma for oneself; and, second, it refers to the magnificence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas that one is increasingly able to perceive as one advances on the path.

After they have passed away, buddhas and bodhisattvas may choose to abide in the dimension of energy and light out of compassion, in order to remain accessible to suffering beings. In their Sambhogakaya form, buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas are intangible but visible, like a rainbow. All the pure realms or heavens of the buddhas, such as the Sukhavati Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha, are Sambhogakaya realms, and the beings that dwell there are in the Sambhogakaya dimension. Only human beings at advanced meditative levels are able to see the Sambhogakaya with their mind's eye and to communicate with the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Visionary experiences are understood as perceptions of Sambhogakaya beings rendered possible by deep meditation.

Those who are not so advanced simply pray to these beings for support and guidance, with the confidence that they are present even though they are not seen. This conviction is what makes the path of devotion such a powerful one.

The Dharmakaya seems to refer, in early Buddhism, to the collection of auspicious qualities of the Buddha: wisdom, compassion and mental power. The notion of the different bodies of a buddha was developed in relation to the Three Refuges. Since the physical body of the Buddha is subject to decay and death it is not a suitable object of Refuge; instead, one takes refuge in the group of enlightened qualities displayed by the Buddha.

In Mahayana the term evolved into a cosmic principle regarded as the true nature of a buddha, and the nature of the enlightened mind itself. It is the nature of purified consciousness, totally free of all defilements, and beyond even the distinction between pure and impure. In fact, the Dharmakaya is beyond words and cannot be described in ordinary language. It is the source from which the worlds of light and physical matter manifest. It corresponds to the ultimate truth in Mahayana.

The *kayas* not only describe aspects of enlightenment, they are cosmic principles that describe the way mind transforms into light and energy, and how light and energy transform into matter. This principle can be used to explain how the universe arises. Some modern religious leaders have drawn parallels between the Trikaya doctrine and that of the Christian Trinity, with God the Father being similar to the Dharmakaya, the Holy Spirit to the Sambhogakaya, and God the Son to the Nirmanakaya.

Some scholars claim that the Sambhogakaya and Dharmakaya are not cognitive, in other words that they are concepts but not cognitively experienced and known. They say that the *kayas* reflect ideas we may have about reality, but there are no grounds for their validity in cognitive experience. Theravadins may assert this in relation to the Sambhogakaya, for example, which is not taught in their system. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists dispute this and argue that this is a misunderstanding. They speak of the Sambhogakaya and Dharmakaya precisely as a way of expressing meditative insights into these dimensions of reality, and the Buddhist path contains methods that are specifically designed to open the mind to these dimensions. In particular, visualisation practice opens the mind to the Sambhogakaya and silent meditation, as well as methods such as koans, open the mind to the Dharmakaya. All three *kayas* are considered to be fully



cognitive because, in all traditions of Buddhism, meditational states are included along with the five senses as bases of valid knowledge.

The principle of the three kayas is important for the integrity of Buddhist thought because it enables us to understand many things that would otherwise be mysterious and inexplicable. In particular, energy and light transcend the laws that govern solid physical matter, and also transcend time and space. It is through that dimension of reality that enlightened beings like the Buddha can perform miracles because they are no longer subject to the laws of physics. The Sambhogakaya dimension also serves as a bridge that permits communication between human beings and the buddhas and bodhisattvas who abide on that level.

We should remember that Mahayana is an umbrella term for many different schools and certain Mahayana schools have unique ways of understanding refuge in the Buddha. For example, the Pure Land schools of China and Japan emphasize primarily or exclusively taking refuge in Buddha Amitabha rather than Buddha Shakyamuni. In Ch'an or Zen, the emphasis is on taking Refuge in the buddha nature within (*tathagatagarbha*) rather than in Buddha as an external figure.

In summary, according to the Trikaya doctrine, one takes refuge not only in the Buddha Shakyamuni but in other Nirmanakaya buddhas of the past and the future and to Sambhogakaya buddhas as well.

Vajrayana understanding

The Vajrayana schools share the same understanding of this Refuge as the Mahayana schools. In addition, Vajrayana practitioners take refuge in their spiritual master. This is because the master is seen as a living embodiment of the qualities of the enlightened mind and of all Three Refuges. The master represents the Buddha since he is one's guide and teacher; his words express the truth of the Dharma; and, as a human being, he is also one's closest spiritual friend in life. In this way he or she embodies all three Refuges.

In the Tibetan tradition it is said that the master or *lama* is even kinder than the Buddha himself because he or she is physically here to train and guide us according to our individual needs. He also has the ability to make the Dharma accessible to us, so we know how to apply it to our own situation and to our own mind. Without a living master, enlightenment would be virtually impossible to achieve. So, in Vajrayana, one first takes Refuge in the master, then in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

