

༄༅། །སྐྱེ་གསུམ་པའི་མདོ།

The Sūtra on the Three Bodies

Trikāyasūtra

འཕགས་པ་སྐུ་གསུམ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa sku gsum zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Three Bodies”

Āryatrikāyanāmahāyānasūtra

· Toh 283 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol. 68 (mdo sde, ya), folios 56.a–57.a

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co.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ti. Title
- im. Imprint
- co. Contents
- s. Summary
- ac. Acknowledgments
- i. Introduction
- tr. The Translation
 - 1. The Three Bodies
- n. Notes
- b. Bibliography
- g. Glossary

s.

SUMMARY

s.1

As the title suggests, this sūtra describes the three bodies of the Buddha. While the Buddha is dwelling on Vulture Peak in Rājagṛha, the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha asks whether the Tathāgata has a body, to which the Buddha replies that the Tathāgata has three bodies: a dharmakāya, a saṃbhogakāya, and a nirmāṇakāya. The Buddha goes on to describe what constitutes these three bodies and their associated meaning. The Buddha explains that the dharmakāya is like space, the saṃbhogakāya is like clouds, and the nirmāṇakāya is like rain. At the end of the Buddha's elucidation, Kṣitigarbha expresses jubilation, and the Buddha declares that whoever upholds this Dharma teaching will obtain immeasurable merit.

ac.

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ac.1 Translation by the Buddhavacana Translation Group, Vienna, under the supervision of Khenpo Konchok Tamphel. Translated into English by Rolf Scheuermann and Casey Kemp.

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i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The setting of this sūtra is Vulture Peak in Rajgir (Rājgrha), said to be the location where the Buddha, explaining the doctrine of emptiness in the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, taught the Prajñāpāramitā and other topics associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is here that the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha asks the Buddha a series of questions regarding the body of the Buddha, which the Buddha answers by expounding the teaching on the three bodies.

i.2

The doctrine of the Buddha's three bodies (*trikāya*) has tended to be associated with the Yogācāra school of Buddhist thought, although the terms dharmakāya and rūpakāya ("form body") are certainly to be found in sūtras such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*.¹ It has been suggested that sūtras such as the *Trikāyasūtra* may have evolved after such Yogācāra treatises as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*.²

i.3

This trifold scheme can also be interpreted as describing different aspects of enlightenment or buddhahood itself. The dharmakāya, sometimes translated as the "truth body" or "reality body," generally refers to the essential nature of the Buddha, as is stated in this sūtra. The saṃbhogakāya and the nirmāṇakāya, known collectively as the form bodies, are understood as emanations of the dharmakāya, or essential nature, of the Buddha. In other words, they are the manifestations of the enlightened activity of the Buddha. The saṃbhogakāya, sometimes translated as "enjoyment body," is the apparitional form the Buddha takes for bodhisattvas and practitioners in meditative states or in dreams. The nirmāṇakāya, sometimes translated as "manifestation body," is the physical form of the Buddha that can be seen by any sentient being. The Buddha, who is able to emanate in countless forms, does so in order to liberate beings through the illumination and demonstration of the Dharma. All three bodies³ are ultimately considered inseparable.

- i.4 This is the only known sūtra in the Tibetan Kangyur solely dedicated to teaching the doctrine of the three bodies. The Buddha explains here how one should view the bodies of the Buddha using analogies, and relates the three bodies to other relevant Buddhist doctrines such as the four wisdoms.⁴
- i.5 This sūtra was first translated by W. Woodville Rockhill in his 1884 publication of *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order*. There is currently no known extant version in Sanskrit, and among the different published Tibetan versions of the source text, there do not seem to be any significant variants.

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra
The Three Bodies

1.

The Translation

[F.56.a]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was dwelling on Vulture Peak Mountain in Rājagṛha. He was accompanied by his entire retinue, by immeasurable, countless bodhisattvas, and by gods and nāgas. They paid respect to the Blessed One and made offerings to him.

1.3 At that time, the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, who was sitting among the retinue, rose from his seat and asked, “Has the Blessed One a body?”

The Blessed One replied, “Kṣitigarbha, the Blessed One, the Tathāgata, [F.56.b] has three bodies: a dharmakāya, a saṃbhogakāya, and a nirmāṇakāya. Son of a noble family, the three bodies of the Tathāgata are these: the pure nature is the dharmakāya, pure meditative absorption is the saṃbhogakāya, and pure conduct is the nirmāṇakāya of all buddhas.

1.4 “Son of a noble family, the dharmakāya of the Tathāgata consists in the fact that he has no nature, just like the sky. His saṃbhogakāya consists in the fact that he comes forth, just like a cloud. His nirmāṇakāya consists in the activity of all the buddhas, the fact that it soaks everything, just like rain.”

1.5 The bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha then asked the Blessed One, “How should one view this explanation on the three bodies of the Blessed One?”

The Blessed One answered the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, “Son of a noble family, you should view the three bodies of the Tathāgata in the following way. That which is seen from the perspective of the Tathāgata is the dharmakāya. That which is seen from the perspective of the bodhisattvas is the saṃbhogakāya. That which is seen from the perspective of ordinary beings who conduct themselves devotedly is the nirmāṇakāya.

1.6 “Son of a noble family, the dharmakāya remains the same nature for all the buddhas. The saṃbhogakāya remains the same meditative absorption for all the buddhas. The nirmāṇakāya remains the same awakened activity for all

the buddhas.

“Son of a noble family, the basis-of-all in its pure state is mirror-like wisdom, the dharmakāya. The afflicted mind in its pure state is the wisdom of equality. Mental cognition in its pure state is discriminating wisdom, the saṃbhogakāya. The five sense cognitions in their pure state are all-accomplishing wisdom, the nirmāṇakāya.”

- 1.7 The bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha then exclaimed to the Blessed One, “Blessed One, the noble Dharma that I have heard from the Blessed One [F.57.a] is excellent, Sugata, really excellent!”

The Blessed One then declared, “Son of a noble family, whoever fully upholds this Dharma discourse of the Blessed One will obtain merit that is immeasurable, inexpressible, incalculable, and unfathomable.”

- 1.8 When the Blessed One had spoken, the world, including the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, the gods, nāgas, yakṣas, and gandharvas, rejoiced and praised the teachings of the Blessed One.

- 1.9 *This concludes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra, “The Three Bodies.”⁵*

n.

NOTES

- n.1 For more on the philosophical considerations of the three bodies, see Harrison (1992), pp. 44–94.
- n.2 See Makransky (1997), p. 274.
- n.3 Some Mahāyāna works such as the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* of Maitreya also mention a fourth body, a *svābhāvikakāya*, or “innate body.” There are conflicting interpretations by Indian and Tibetan commentators as to the relationship between the *svābhāvikakāya* and the *dharmakāya*. For more on the four bodies, see Makransky (1997).
- n.4 For information on the relationship between the three bodies and four wisdoms in Buddhist literature, see Brunnhölzl (2009), pp. 71–76.
- n.5 The colophon makes no mention of who the Tibetan translators were, and the Degé catalog (*dkar chag*, vol. 103, lak+Sh+mI, F.133.a.3) states that this is not known.

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding ·
source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
RP	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
RS	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
SU	<i>Source unspecified</i> This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.

g.1 afflicted mind
nyon mongs pa'i yid

ཉོན་མོངས་པའི་ཡིད།

kliṣṭamāna

g.2 all-accomplishing wisdom

bya ba grub pa'i ye shes

བྱ་བ་གྲུབ་པའི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

kṛtyānuṣṭhānajñāna

g.3 basis-of-all

kun gzhi

ཀུན་གཞི།

ālaya

Here, probably the short form for *ālayavijñāna*.

g.4 blessed one

bcom ldan 'das

བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས།

bhagavat

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

In Buddhist literature, this is an epithet applied to buddhas, most often to Śākyamuni. The Sanskrit term generally means “possessing fortune,” but in specifically Buddhist contexts it implies that a buddha is in possession of six auspicious qualities (*bhaga*) associated with complete awakening. The Tibetan term—where *bcom* is said to refer to “subduing” the four *māras*, *ldan* to “possessing” the great qualities of buddhahood, and *'das* to “going beyond” *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*—possibly reflects the commentarial tradition where the Sanskrit *bhagavat* is interpreted, in addition, as “one who destroys the four *māras*.” This is achieved either by reading *bhagavat* as *bhagnavat* (“one who broke”), or by tracing the word *bhaga* to the root *√bhañj* (“to break”).

g.5 bodhisattva

byang chub sems dpa'

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའ།

bodhisattva

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A being who is dedicated to the cultivation and fulfilment of the altruistic intention to attain perfect buddhahood, traversing the ten bodhisattva levels (*daśabhūmi*, *sa bcu*). Bodhisattvas purposely opt to remain within cyclic existence in order to liberate all sentient beings, instead of simply seeking personal freedom from suffering. In terms of the view, they realize both the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena.

g.6 dharmakāya

chos kyi sku

ཆོས་ཀྱི་སྒྲུ།

dharmakāya

“Body of dharma”; refers to the Buddha’s realization of reality. Sometimes translated “truth body” or “reality body.” In other contexts, particularly in early texts, the term may also refer to the Buddha’s qualities as a collective whole, or to his teachings as embodying him.

g.7 discriminating wisdom

so sor kun du rtog pa’i ye shes

སོ་སོར་ཀུན་དུ་རྟོག་པའི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

pratyavekṣaṇājñāna

g.8 emptiness

stong pa nyid

སྟོང་པ་ནིད།

śūnyatā

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

Emptiness denotes the ultimate nature of reality, the total absence of inherent existence and self-identity with respect to all phenomena.

According to this view, all things and events are devoid of any independent, intrinsic reality that constitutes their essence. Nothing can be said to exist independent of the complex network of factors that gives rise to its origination, nor are phenomena independent of the cognitive processes and mental constructs that make up the conventional framework within which their identity and existence are posited. When all levels of conceptualization dissolve and when all forms of dichotomizing tendencies are quelled through deliberate meditative deconstruction of conceptual elaborations, the ultimate nature of reality will finally become manifest. It is the first of the three gateways to liberation.

g.9 five sense cognitions

sgo lnga’i rnam par shes pa

སྒོ་ལྔའི་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ།

—

g.10 form bodies

gzugs kyi sku

གཟུགས་ཀྱི་སྒྲུ།

rūpakāya

See “rūpakāya.”

g.11 **gandharva**

dri za

དི་ཟ།

gandharva

Literally “smell eaters,” these are a class of spirits, sometimes described as celestial musicians. In other contexts the term can also refer to beings in the bardo state.

g.12 **Kṣitigarbha**

sa'i snying po

སའི་སྤྱིང་པོ།

kṣitigarbha

An important bodhisattva disciple of the Buddha.

g.13 **Mahāyāna**

theg pa chen po

ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོ།

mahāyāna

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

When the Buddhist teachings are classified according to their power to lead beings to an awakened state, a distinction is made between the teachings of the Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna), which emphasizes the individual’s own freedom from cyclic existence as the primary motivation and goal, and those of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna), which emphasizes altruism and has the liberation of all sentient beings as the principal objective. As the term “Great Vehicle” implies, the path followed by bodhisattvas is analogous to a large carriage that can transport a vast number of people to liberation, as compared to a smaller vehicle for the individual practitioner.

g.14 **mental cognition**

yid kyi rnam par shes pa

ཡིད་ཀྱི་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ།

manovijñāna

Just as the five sense cognitions occur on the basis of the five sense faculties, mental cognition is the cognition that occurs on the basis of the mind faculty.

g.15 mirror-like wisdom

me long lta bu'i ye shes

མེ་ལོང་ལྷ་བུའི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

ādarśajñāna

g.16 nāga

klu

ལྷ།

nāga

Snake-like mystical creatures with supernatural powers, which belong to the animal realm.

g.17 nirmāṇakāya

sprul pa'i sku

སྤྱུལ་པའི་སྐུ།

nirmāṇakāya

“Body of manifestation.” Aspect of buddhahood perceptible to ordinary individuals with good karma.

g.18 prajñāpāramitā

shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa

ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པ།

prajñāpāramitā

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The sixth of the six perfections, it refers to the profound understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena, the realization of ultimate reality. It is often personified as a female deity, worshiped as the “Mother of All Buddhas” (*sarvajīnamātā*).

g.19 Rājgrha

rgyal po'i khab

རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།

rājgrha

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The ancient capital of Magadha prior to its relocation to Pāṭaliputra during the Mauryan dynasty, Rājagṛha is one of the most important locations in Buddhist history. The literature tells us that the Buddha and his saṅgha spent a considerable amount of time in residence in and around Rājagṛha—in nearby places, such as the Vulture Peak Mountain (Gṛdhrakūṭaparvata), a major site of the Mahāyāna sūtras, and the Bamboo Grove (Veṇuvana)—enjoying the patronage of King Bimbisāra and then of his son King Ajātaśatru. Rājagṛha is also remembered as the location where the first Buddhist monastic council was held after the Buddha Śākyamuni passed into parinirvāṇa. Now known as Rajgir and located in the modern Indian state of Bihar.

g.20 rūpakāya

gzugs kyi sku

གཟུགས་ཀྱི་སྐུ།

rūpakāya

Used to refer to the two form bodies of the Buddha, i.e., the *nirmāṇakāya* and the *saṃbhogakāya*.

g.21 saṃbhogakāya

longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku

ལོངས་སྤྱོད་རྫོགས་པའི་སྐུ།

saṃbhogakāya

“Body of enjoyment.” Aspect of buddhahood perceptible to bodhisattvas.

g.22 tathāgata

de bzhin gshegs pa

དེ་བཞིན་གསེགས་པ།

tathāgata

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A frequently used synonym for *buddha*. According to different explanations, it can be read as *tathā-gata*, literally meaning “one who has thus gone,” or as *tathā-āgata*, “one who has thus come.” *Gata*, though literally meaning “gone,” is a past passive participle used to describe a state or condition of existence. *Tatha(tā)*, often rendered as “suchness” or “thusness,” is the quality or condition of things as they really are, which cannot be conveyed in conceptual, dualistic terms. Therefore, this epithet is interpreted in different ways, but in general it implies one who has departed in the wake of the buddhas of the past, or one who has manifested the supreme awakening

dependent on the reality that does not abide in the two extremes of existence and quiescence. It is also often used as a specific epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.23 three bodies

sku gsum

སྐུ་གསུམ།

trikāya

g.24 Vulture Peak Mountain

bya rgod phung po'i ri

བྱ་རྒོད་ཕུང་པོའི་རི།

gr̥dhrakūṭa-parvata

Name of a mountain close to Rājgṛha. It is famous as the place where the Buddha is said to have taught the Prajñāpāramitā and other teachings.

g.25 wisdom of equality

mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes

མཉམ་པ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

samatājñāna

g.26 yakṣa

gnod sbyin

གནོད་སྐྱིན།

yakṣa

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A class of nonhuman beings who inhabit forests, mountainous areas, and other natural spaces, or serve as guardians of villages and towns, and may be propitiated for health, wealth, protection, and other boons, or controlled through magic. According to tradition, their homeland is in the north, where they live under the rule of the Great King Vaiśravaṇa.

Several members of this class have been deified as gods of wealth (these include the just-mentioned Vaiśravaṇa) or as bodhisattva generals of yakṣa armies, and have entered the Buddhist pantheon in a variety of forms, including, in tantric Buddhism, those of wrathful deities.

g.27 Yogācāra

rnal 'byor spyod pa

མཁའ་ཁྱེད་སྒྲིབ་པ།

yogācāra

Influential philosophical school belonging to Mahāyāna Buddhism.