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The Sūtra on the Three Bodies

Trikāyasūtra

Translated into Tibetan by
Unknown

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

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra "The Three Bodies"

Āryatrikāyanāmamahāyānasūtra



Toh 283
Degé Kangyur, vol. 68 (mdo sde, ya), folios 56.a–57.a

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co.

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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 Rājgrha, 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 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.

This translation has been completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

- i.1 The setting of this sūtra is Vulture Peak in Rajgir (Rājgr̥ha), 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 *Asṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*.¹ It has been suggested that sūtras such as the *Trikāyasūtra* may have evolved after such Yogācāra treatises as the *Mahāyānasūtrālambikāra*.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 Rājgr̥ha. 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. The dharmakāya should be viewed as that which is the essence of the Tathāgata. The saṃbhogakāya should be viewed as that which is the essence of the bodhisattvas. The nirmāṇakāya should be viewed as that which is the essence of ordinary beings who conduct themselves devotedly.
- 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 *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* 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 *dharmaṃkāya*. 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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g.

GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for Sanskrit names and terms ·

<i>AS</i>	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in the Sanskrit manuscript used as a source for this translation.
<i>AO</i>	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other Sanskrit manuscripts of the Kangyur or Tengyur.
<i>AD</i>	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionaries.
<i>AA</i>	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where Tibetan-Sanskrit relationship is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
<i>RS</i>	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
<i>SU</i>	<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

ਕਲਿਸ਼ਟਮਾਨ
klisṭamana

g.2 all-accomplishing wisdom

bya ba grub pa'i ye shes

ਕ੃ਤਯਾਨੁਸਥਾਨਾਜਿਨਾ

kṛtyānuśṭhānajñāna

g.3 basis-of-all

kun gzhi

ਅਲਾਯਾ

ālaya

Here, probably the short form for *ālayavijñāna*.

g.4 blessed one

bcom ldan 'das

ਬਹਗਵਾਤ

bhagavat

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

In Buddhist literature, 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” samsāra 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'

ਬੋਧਿਸਤਵ

bodhisattva

According to the Mahāyāna, an individual with the intent to achieve awakening for the sake of all beings.

g.6 dharmakāya

chos kyi sku

ਕੰਸ਼ਟ੍ਰੀਣੂ

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

སྒྲྱ རྗྐྵ རྩྷ རྩྷ ພྱ ແ ພྱ

pratyaveksaṇājñāna

g.8 emptiness

stong pa nyid

ສྣ ພ ດ ຊ ດ

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 lṅga'i rnam par shes pa

ສྣ ປ ສ ສ ພ ພ ພ

—

g.10 form bodies

gzugs kyi sku

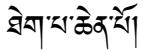
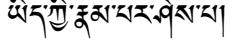
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rūpakāya

See “rūpakāya.”

- g.11 gandharva
dri za

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

kṣitigarbha
An important bodhisattva disciple of the Buddha.
- g.13 Mahāyāna
theg pa chen po

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

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

ଶେଷଦକ୍ଷାସୁରିଷେଷଣ
ādarśajñāna

- g.16 nāga
klu
ନାଗ
nāga
Snake-like mystical creatures with supernatural powers, which belong to the animal realm.
- g.17 nirmāṇakāya
sprul pa'i sku
ନିର୍ମାଣକାୟ
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
ପ୍ରଜ୍ଞାପାରମିତା
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” (*sarvajinamātā*).
- g.19 Rājgrha
rgyal po'i khab
ରାଜଗ୍ରହ
rājgrha
Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:
The ancient capital of Magadha prior to its relocation to Pāṭaliputra during the Mauryan dynasty, Rājagrha 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 Rājagrha—in nearby places, such as the Vulture Peak Mountain (Gr̥dhrakūṭaparvata), 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. Rājagrha 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

ရုပ္ပနာ၍

rūpakāya

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

g.21 sambhogakāya

longs spyod ndzogs pa'i sku

សាគಭogaಕායා

saṃbhogakāya

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

g.22 tathāgata

de bzhin gshegs pa

တနခြေရာများ

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 also often used as a specific epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.23 three bodies

sku gsum

三身身

trikāya

g.24 Vulture Peak Mountain

bya rgod phung po'i ri

शक्तिसुरभूमि

gṛdhra kūṭa-parvata

Name of a mountain close to Rājgrha. 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

समताज्ञानम्

samatājñāna

g.26 yakṣa

gnod sbyin

यक्ष

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 jurisdiction of the Great King Vaiśravāṇa.

Several members of this class have been deified as gods of wealth (these include the just mentioned Vaiśravāṇa) 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

योगाचार

yogācāra

Influential philosophical school belonging to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

