

སྐྱེ་གསུམ་པའི་མདོ།

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**The Sūtra on the Three Bodies**

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*Trikāyasūtra*

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

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

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The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Three Bodies”

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*Āryatrikāyanāmahāyānasūtra*



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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.1

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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*.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that sūtras such as the *Trikāyasūtra* may have evolved after such Yogācāra treatises as the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*.<sup>2</sup>

i.3

This tri-fold 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 sambhogakāya 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 sambhogakāya, 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 bodies<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

- 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 TRANSLATION

### The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

#### The Three Bodies

- 1.1 [F.56.a] 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 Rājgrha. 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 sambhogakāya 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 sambhogakāya. 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.

c. Colophon

c.1 This concludes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra, *The Three Bodies*.<sup>5</sup>

n.

## NOTES

- 1 For more on the philosophical considerations of the three bodies, see Harrison (1992) pp 44-94.
- 2 See Makransky (1997) pp.274.
- 3 Some Mahāyāna works such as the Abhisamayālamkāra 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).
- 4 For information on the relationship between the three bodies and four wisdoms in Buddhist literature, see Brunnhölzl (2009) pp.71-76.
- 5 The colophon makes no mention of who the Tibetan translators were, and the Degé catalogue (*dkar chag*, vol. 103, lak+Sh+mI, F.133.a.3) states that this is not known.

b.

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## GLOSSARY

g.

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་གུབ་པའི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

*kr̥tyānuśṭhānajñāna*

g.3

**Basis-of-all**

*kun gzhi*

ཀུན་གཞི།

*ālaya*

Here, probably the short form for *ālayavijñāna*.

g.4

**Blessed One**

*bcom ldan 'das*

བཙེམ་ལྷན་འདས།

*Bhagavat*

Epithet of the Buddha.

g.5

**Bodhisattva**

*byang chub sems dpa'*

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔལ།

*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*

ཚོས་ཀྱི་སྐུ།

*dharmakāya*

Dharmakāya or 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*  
 ལྷོང་པ་ཉིད།  
*śūnyatā*
- g.9 **Five sense cognitions**  
*sgo lnga'i rnam par shes pa*  
 སློ་ལྗེ་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ།
- g.10 **Form bodies**  
*gzugs kyi sku*  
 ཀུའུ་གཉིས་ཀྱི་སྐུ།  
*rūpakāya*  
 See “rūpakāya.”
- g.11 **Gandharvas**  
*dri za*  
 དྲི་ཟ།  
*gandharva*  
 Gandharvas, literally “smell-eaters,” 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*
- g.14 **Mental cognition**  
*yiid 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་སྤྱི་ཡེ་ཤེས།

*ādarśajñāna*

**g.16 Nāgas**

*klu*

ལྷ།

*nāga*

Snake-like mystical creature with supernatural powers belonging to the animal realm.

**g.17 Nirmāṇakāya**

*sprul pa'i sku*

སྤྱུལ་པའི་སྐུ།

*nirmāṇakāya*

Nirmāṇakāya or 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*

**g.19 Rājgrha**

*rgyal po'i khab*

རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།

*Rājgrha*

Town close to Nālānda in the modern 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 sambhogakāya.

**g.21 Sambhogakāya**

*longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*

ལོངས་སྤྱོད་རྫོགས་པའི་སྐུ།

*sambhogakāya*

Sambhogakāya or body of enjoyment. Aspect of buddhahood perceptible to bodhisattvas.

**g.22 Tathāgata**

*de bzhin gshegs pa*

དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པ།

*Tathāgata*

Epithet of the Buddha.

**g.23 Three bodies**

*sku gsum*

སྐུ་གསུམ།

*trikāya*

**g.24**      **Vulture Peak Mountain**

*bya rgod phung po'i ri*

བྱ་རྒྱུད་ཕུང་པོའི་རི།

*Gṛdhrakūṭa-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།

*samatājnāna*

**g.26**      **Yakṣas**

*gnod sbyin*

གནོད་སྦྱིན།

*yakṣa*

Yakṣas or harm givers. A class of mostly malevolent spirits.

**g.27**      **Yogācāra**

*rnal 'byor spyod pa*

རྣལ་འབྱོར་སྦྱོང་པ།

*yogācāra*

Influential philosophical school belonging to Mahāyāna Buddhism.