

The Buddha Bodies & Buddha Nature

This teaching on the Buddha Bodies and Buddha Nature was given by Geshe Dhonam at Trashi Gomang Buddhist Centre in Auckland, New Zealand, on 29 January 2020, and translated by Celia Smith.

Today our topic is firstly the four bodies of the Buddha, and then we will look at Buddha Nature — the potential of the minds of all humans to attain Buddhahood.

When considering the bodies of the Buddha, at first there are two **divisions**: into the Truth body (Dharmakaya) and the Form body (Rupakaya). And then each of these further divides into two.

1. The Dharmakaya divides into the **Exalted Wisdom Truth body** (Jnanakaya), which is the mind of the Buddha; and the **Nature body** (Svabhavikakaya):
 - a. The Exalted Truth body refers to the mind the Buddha. (In Tibetan there is an honorific word for this — *tug* — but in English we just have the single word ‘mind’.)
 - b. The Nature body refers to the lack of true or lack of inherent existence of the mind of the Buddha. Another way of saying this is that it refers to the ultimate nature of the mind, which is its lack of true existence.

We also refer to the mind of the Buddha (i.e. **the Exalted Wisdom Truth body**) as ‘the all-knowing mind’ because one of its characteristics is that it knows all phenomena. And it, in turn, is divided into the two — ‘the exalted wisdom that knows the mode’, referring to realisation of the final nature of phenomena, the emptiness of phenomena; and the exalted wisdom that knows the diversity of phenomena, referring to that which realises the different objects of conventional truth. Because there are these two aspects, we speak of the Buddha’s mind as ‘the all-knowing mind that knows emptiness’ and ‘the all-knowing mind that knows the diversity of phenomena’, but these subdivisions are not different bodies or entities as such — they are one entity with two aspects: an all-knowing mind that cognises emptiness and all-knowing mind that knows the diversity of phenomena.

In general, the countenance of the Buddha is always in meditative equipoise on emptiness. But within that meditative equipoise on emptiness, the Buddha’s mind also cognises all phenomena, accomplishes the 12 deeds, *and* gives teachings of the dharma to sentient beings. For the Buddha there is no separation between meditative equipoise and post-session — they are simultaneous. Before attaining Buddhahood even high Bodhisattvas, even up to the 10th ground, when in meditative equipoise on emptiness do not cognise conventional phenomena; they would not cultivate meditations on bodhicitta/compassion. In order to do that, they would need to arise from meditative equipoise on emptiness *and then* engage in compassion. Whereas for the Buddha, whatever activity he’s engaged in — such as generosity or other perfections — is achieved within his state of meditative equipoise and he does not need to leave that state to accomplish activities.

For those who have not yet achieved Buddhahood, for example the Bodhisattvas, when they are meditating on emptiness it is ‘linked’ to the method aspect of compassion and bodhicitta — ‘**linked**’ meaning that before they engage in meditating (to achieve meditative equipoise) they generate a bodhicitta motivation that will link their meditative equipoise to bodhicitta even though they are not actually meditating on bodhicitta at the same time. Whereas the Buddha, while being absorbed in meditative equipoise, simultaneously meditates on bodhicitta and carries out other enlightened activities.

The enlightened activities of the Buddha are said to be **spontaneous and limitless**. Spontaneous means that there is no need to set motivation for the activity to be accomplished. Simply the fact that the sentient being’s continuum has ripened will result in the teaching arising — it depends on the ripening of the sentient being’s own

continuum and whether or not they have the required merit. And speaking of the form bodies of the Buddha — the Enjoyment and Emanation bodies — the giving of teachings to the entourage of Bodhisattvas also arrives without specific intention. Those Bodhisattvas who have gained high grounds have accumulated such great merit that they have a direct link with the Buddhas through which the teachings are received. This is what is meant by limitless and spontaneous. By contrast, we beings who have not made such attainments must set an intention to accomplish a certain activity.

As mentioned earlier, the mind of the Buddha refers to the Wisdom Truth body *and* the Nature body. So, we come to the **Nature body** (Svabhavikakaya). This is the ‘lack of true existence of the all-knowing mind’ or the ‘lack of true existence of the mind of the Buddha’. Within the Nature body there are two aspects or separate isolates: they are the Nature body aspect that is naturally pure; and the Nature body aspect that is adventitiously pure through being free of stains. If we consider the example of a 10th ground Bodhisattva, the mind of this being lacks true existence. This 10th ground Bodhisattva is engaged in the practice of purifying obscurations, and on attaining the all-knowing state, then that lack of true existence which is still present — that becomes the naturally-pure Nature body, the first aspect. Using the same example of a 10th ground Bodhisattva, as this being abandons their obscurations to knowing, there is the truth of cessation that comes from having abandoned the obscurations to knowing; and that state of abandonment is not other than the lack of true existence — the adventitiously pure Nature body. When we describe the Nature body we explain these two different aspects, but in fact they are not different entities.

Coming back to the Bodhisattva, we speak of Bodhisattvas going from lower to higher grounds, from lesser realisation to greater realisation, moving from meditative equipoise to meditative equipoise, through the many stages of abandoning the obscurations. The principal object of meditation is the lack of true existence of the Bodhisattva’s own mind or continuum. In meditating on the lack of true existence of the mind, the stains are cleared away — the obstructions of afflictive emotion and the obstructions to knowing. The clarity they achieve in this way is not different to the lack of true existence itself, and the analogy that illustrates this is clouds in the sky. When the clouds dissolve, the clarity that emerges is not other than the sky itself. This is the way the Middle Way schools assert the reasoning as regards emptiness.

At the time of Sutra, in general we speak of gaining higher realisation, the Bodhisattvas meditating and traversing through the lower paths, abandoning obscurations and attaining Buddhahood. In terms of meditations, there are two types: method and wisdom. Method refers to meditations on bodhicitta. Wisdom refers principally to meditations on emptiness, and specifically meditations on emptiness of ones own continuum or mind. So that is the explanation for the time of Sutra.

In Tantra, the object of meditation is emptiness of the mind, and is no different from that meditated on in Sutra. But the mind that is meditated on in Tantra is the most subtle mind, and it’s referred to as ‘the simultaneous great blissful exalted wisdom.’ But in essence, it’s still referring to the emptiness of the mind.

Then we have the two Form bodies (Rupakayas) — the Enjoyment body (Sambhogakaya) and the Emanation body (Nirmanakaya).

The **Enjoyment** body has the characteristics of the 32 major marks and 80 minor signs of a Buddha, and the Emanation body is said to have the five certainties that refer to:

1. The certainty of place — is situated near the form realm. The universe is divided into 3 realms — the desire realm, the form realm & formless realm. The form realm has 17 divisions and at its highest is Ogmin — ‘that which is below none’, like a Buddhist pureland.
2. The certainty of entourage — entourage means only the Arya Bodhisattvas, and does not include those Bodhisattvas who have realised the paths of accumulation and joining but do not yet have the merit to meet

directly the Enjoyment body. But those who have attained the path of seeing, who are Mahayana or Arya beings, they *are* able to meet directly the Enjoyment body of the Buddhas in the ‘highest below none’ in Ogmin and take many profound teachings.

3. The certainty of Dharma — means that the Dharma taught by the Enjoyment body is all Mahayana Dharma. The Enjoyment body associates with the entourage or retinue of high level Bodhisattvas and so only teaches Mahayana Dharma, not the lesser vehicle which is for those who seek liberation for themselves alone.
4. The certainty of form refers to the form of the Enjoyment body having the 32 major marks and 80 minor signs of a Buddha, so definite appearance.
5. The certainty of time. The Enjoyment body will abide until samsara is emptied, until all sentient beings attain Buddhahood. This certainty explains why we can be sure that Shakyamuni Buddha who appeared over 2,500 years ago in Bodhgaya was an Emanation body not an Enjoyment body, because Shakyamuni’s body has not continued to abide.

These are the 5 characteristics of the Enjoyment body.

Then we have the **Emanation body**, for example Shakyamuni Buddha, who appeared in this world and accomplished the purposes of sentient beings and the 12 deeds of the Buddha. Shakyamuni is considered an Emanation body [from the perspective] of the Middle Way schools. The Great Expositionist and Sutrists schools however would not explain it in this way. They would simply say he was born as the son of a king, and as an ordinary being. Seeing the sufferings of birth, sickness, aging and death generated in him an urge to be free from cyclic existence, to take ordination, meditate on emptiness and newly attain Buddhahood. Whereas the Mahayana schools of both Mind Only and the Middle Way would say that previously he had generated bodhicitta and attained Buddhahood, and what he did in this world was to generate how to attain Buddhahood and to show the 12 deeds; and they would say that the Emanation body of Shakyamuni is an example of a Supreme Emanation body. There are also examples of artisan and rebirth Emanation bodies.

The extensive explanation of the four bodies is contained in Asanga’s text *The Ornament of the Clear Realisation*, and specifically the 8th chapter, and there are many commentaries on this text. When I was completing my studies, this was part of my studies.

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So we come to the ‘lineage’ or ‘element’ which has a very strong connection to what we’ve discussed here about the four bodies of the Buddha. For example, ourselves as sentient beings have not yet attained Buddhahood, we have not yet attained the four bodies of the Buddha, but within our continuum we have the seed/lineage/element that means we can attain Buddhahood. That was the teaching of the Buddha. A source text for this is *The Buddha Nature Sutra*, and the most extensive commentary on this was the master Maitreya’s commentary *Uttaratantra*.

To look at *Uttaratantra*, when Shakyamuni was abiding in India he turned the wheel of Dharma three times: the first turning was that of the Four Noble Truths when he taught that phenomena were truly existent. In the second turning he taught their lack of inherent existence. In the third turning there are many different sutras that are posited, and one is the sutra on Buddha Nature. The essence of this sutra is that on the second turning, when he taught that phenomena lack true existence, he then explained that all sentient beings have an element which is Buddha Nature — that they are able to attain Buddhahood — and in brief this would mean that their minds have the lack of true existence that is the essence of Buddhahood.

There are five reasons given in *Uttaratantra* and tonight I will cover two of them but we won’t spend time on the other three.

The first reason is this: In the middle turning of the wheel of Dharma the Buddha explained the lack of true existence of the continuum of sentient beings — that this is their Buddha Nature, their potential to attain Buddhahood, their seed or possibility — to overcome discouragement, as there may be sentient beings who would think ‘I couldn’t possibly attain Buddhahood’ and ‘I’m not capable of realising the path and clearing obscurations.’ To overcome this, he taught this point so beings would be able to cultivate joyous effort, realising they were able to abandon obscurations and attain an enduring ultimate happiness. They would cease discouragement or the downcast mind.

The second reason is that there may be some persons who look down on other sentient beings, who see them as lesser; for example even Bodhisattvas who have generated realisations of bodhicitta may look down on those who have not generated such realisations. So to cease this, the Buddha taught that all six classes of beings have this Buddha Nature, this potential. In the *Uttaratantra* text many reasons are given to establish this; and an analogy is a gold nugget — even if there is an impurity in it, once that impurity is removed it is stainless, completely pure gold. We should not look down on any sentient being even down to the tiniest ant, because in the future that ant will become a Buddha. All six classes of beings have this potential and thus one doesn’t look down on them.

If we were to ask what is this lineage? What is Buddha Nature? There are many different assertions within the four philosophical Buddhist tenets:

- The **Great Expositionists** refer to Buddha Nature as ‘the roots of virtue of non-attachment’ or another way of saying it is ‘few desires and contentment — this is the Buddha lineage’. Why? Because the Great Expositionist position asserts that desire is the root of cyclic existence; that from desire come many other afflictive emotions and problems. And the opposite of desire is contentment.
- Then the **Sutrists** say that Buddha Nature is ‘the potential of the mental consciousness to give rise to an uncontaminated exalted wisdom’. And what ‘uncontaminated exalted wisdom’ means is give rise to the path, whether that’s the realisation of emptiness or the attainment of the all-knowing mind. And it is this potential that all sentient beings have, which will later become either Nature Body or All-Knowing Mind.
- The **Mind-Only** school has a similar assertion. They say that there is this potential to give rise to an uncontaminated wisdom. But they would say the potential is possessed by the mind basis of all.
- In terms of the **Autonomists and Consequentialists**, there is not a great difference [between them] in how they assert the lineage or Buddha Nature. For we sentient beings, the lack of true existence of our mind is this lineage, and because our mind lacks true existence, then when we meditate on the path cultivating emptiness and bodhicitta, eventually this becomes the Nature Body.

When we talk about the lineage, there are two aspects: the naturally abiding lineage and the developmental lineage. And again, there are varying explanations in the different schools.

- For **Sutrist and Mind-Only** schools who assert that lineage is the potential of the mind to generate an uncontaminated wisdom, there is the **naturally-abiding lineage** that has this potential even when we haven't meditated and cultivated the path. And then when we engage in hearing, reflecting and meditating on the path that becomes both the **naturally-abiding and developmental lineages**.
- Then the Middle Way schools — the **Autonomists and Consequentialists**: as before we said they assert that the lack of true existence of the mind is the **naturally-abiding lineage**. And that is what in future, through meditating on the path, will become the Nature Body. And then the **developmental lineage** is the continuum of the mind that by cultivating the path will become the Exalted Wisdom Truth body.

So then, just to make the point, there are many debates that are posited within the text of *Uttaratantra* but we won't look at them now. What is enough for us to know at this point is that the lack of true existence of the mind in the future will become the Nature Body; and the mind itself will become the all-knowing consciousness.

References:

Asanga, *The Ornament of the Clear Realisation*, and specifically Chapter 8
The Buddha Nature Sutra, Maitreya commentary *Uttaratantra*