



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

The Three Kayas

The topic of the three kayas belongs to Mahayana philosophy. For people unfamiliar with Buddhist thought that is enough information. If you have already studied a bit, then Mahayana contains two schools: Cittamatra and Madhayamika. Today I will talk from the Madhayamika view point. This is framed by the following outline: the ground is the union of the two truths - the relative truth and the ultimate truth; the path is the union of the two accumulations - the accumulations of merit and wisdom; and the result is the union of the two kayas - the dharmakaya and the rupakaya. These two kayas can then be expanded to three or four kayas, which will be today's topic. The all-knowing Mipham Rinpoche writes in the Beacon of Certainty that we must always treat the two truths, the two accumulations, and the two kayas as in union and not as separate entities.

The common translation of the Sanskrit word "kaya" is form, but do not think of a mere physical form. Physical form does not entirely capture the meaning of kaya, because kaya also includes consciousness. To take the Buddha as an example, his knowledge is on the level of consciousness and his body is on the level of physicality, and both are included in the different kayas.

Concerning consciousness, we talk about the two qualities of the dharmakaya: the complete absence of the two obscurations¹ constituting the Noble Truth of Cessation and the primordial, all-encompassing wisdom. What does dharmakaya mean? Again we can break this down into two parts - the essence kaya, denoting the emptiness aspect of the enlightened mind, and the wisdom dharmakaya, referring to the wisdom aspect.

To simplify, the Buddha's wisdom is by nature emptiness. This is called essence kaya because the essence is empty. The qualities of the Buddha's wisdom are clarity, luminosity, omniscience, and all-pervading compassion. That is called the wisdom dharmakaya. Together these constitute the dharmakaya. Without knowing this, we might become confused, because sometimes in discussing the dharmakaya emptiness is being talked about, and sometimes the aspect of the qualities is under consideration.

¹ 1) Emotional obscurations consist of afflictive emotions arising through grasping onto an inherent self of the individual. These obscure the realisation of liberation. 2) Cognitive obscurations consist of thoughts, ego etc. that arise through grasping at phenomena as inherently existing and obscure the realisation of supreme enlightenment.

The next point is how the dharmakaya actually appears to beings. According to the purity of beings' perception there are two modes, which as a unity are called rupakaya or form kaya. One mode is the Sambhogakaya, the kaya of enjoyment, which can only be perceived by Bodhisattvas on the 10th bhumi. The other is the Nirmanakaya, perceivable by all beings. An example of Nirmanakaya is Buddha Shakyamuni, who was born in Lumbini (currently in Nepal), was enlightened in Bodhgaya, taught the Four Noble Truths and so on. These actual manifestations occur due to the compassion, love, and wisdom the Buddhas direct to beings.

In other words, the Dharmakaya is the empty essence and the wisdom aspect of the Buddhas, being luminous clarity. The Sambhogakaya is the appearance to spiritually very highly advanced beings. The Nirmanakaya is the appearance to ordinary beings of enlightened beings like Buddha Shakyamuni with all of his marks of perfection .

The Sambhogakaya possesses the following five certainties:

- 1) the certainty of the dwelling place is a pure field of the five Buddha Families such as Akanishta;
- 2) the certainty of the retinue is that only Bodhisattvas who have reached the 10th bhumi are part of it;
- 3) the certainty of the teaching is that only the Mahayana is expounded;
- 4) the certainty of the time is that it is a very stable continuum;
- 5) the certainty of the teacher is that only the Buddhas of the respective Buddhafields teach while appearing as Sambhogakaya deities.

If these five certainties are not certain and subject to change, we are in the realm of the Nirmanakaya:

- 1) The uncertainty of the dwelling place is that the Buddhas can appear anywhere, even in hell realms, animal realms etc. if they can be of benefit there;
- 2) The uncertainty of the retinue is that all kinds of beings can be students of a Nirmanakaya Buddha - humans of course, but also gods, nagas etc.;
- 3) The uncertainty of the teaching is that anything that benefits beings at that moment is taught, including the Theravada;
- 4) The uncertainty of the time is that there are great fluctuations in the time frame. To clarify, the time in the Sambhogakaya is like German time where everything is punctual and happens at the appointed minute and hour. Nirmanakaya time is like Nepali time, it is never clear when things will happen;
- 5) The uncertainty of the teacher is that the Buddhas can take on any beneficial form, even as animals or inanimate object like bridges, if this is helpful.

I hope this provides a good introduction to the kayas and their different aspects, but if this subject holds greater interest for you, please seek more teachings on this topic.

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