

VESAK DHARMA TALK

May, 2009

This is the day on which we celebrate the birth of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha, Gautama Shakyamuni. In his thirties this person left his privileged situation, his family and all of his comforts and began his search for answers about the nature of *dukkha* and its relief. We all know the story and that he became the Buddha, a being at the end of the cycle of births, one who has come to full Awakening. Today, rather than recounting his life again, we can explore, not who Shakyamuni was, but rather, what and who is a Buddha?

There are three common ways to view a Buddha:

- one, as recited in the chant *Namo tassa, bhagavato, arahato samma sambuddhasa*,
- the second through the title of Tath-gata, (tuh-TAH-gu-tah), the One Who Comes Thus, and
- the third, the concept of the Trik-ya, the Three Bodies of a Buddha.

The Formula: *Namo tassa, bhagavato, arahato samma sambuddhasa*

This is the phrase directed at Shakyamuni, and which we recite at the end of the Precepts. It means: “Homage to Him, the

Exalted One, the Worthy One, The Supremely Enlightened One.”

Bhagavat is the common phrase in India to refer to the object of one’s devotions. The root, *bhag*, is the verb “to adore”. Some of you may have heard of or read the *Bhagavad Gita*, The Song of the Lord, dedicated to Krishna. It teaches the highest form of practice as *bhakti*, dedicating all of one’s actions as an offering to the deity. This was definitely an influence in the time of early dharma. In fact, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Buddha is included as an *avatar* (incarnation) of Krishna. There are numerous places in early sutras where Shakyamuni is referred to as *bhagavat*, meaning The Lord Buddha.

An *arhat* in early Theravada was the highest attainer, a person who had achieved individual Enlightenment. He is not a Buddha but would not be re-born and his body would not accumulate any further karmic energy. In this case, it would mean the model for all individual seekers. A *sama-sambuddha* is the highest of the high, the fully Awakened Buddha.

Tath-gata

A Tath-gata is a being who has evolved or arisen (*gata*) as Thusness (*tathat-*). That is, they present themselves exactly as they are, without any artifice or fabrication. A Buddha is someone who displays things as they are. We often define the Dharma as the truth that things are exactly as they are

Thusness is also a synonym for *buddhat~*, what we refer to as buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is the inherent presence of full and complete Awakening in all things. So, Shakyamuni displayed his Buddha-nature in a full and complete way. When he is called the Thus Come One he is identified as the one who as transformed into Thusness, he has fully displayed or fulfilled his Buddha-nature. The concept of thusness is often viewed as a complement to the concept of *shunyat~* (emptiness). All conditioned are viewed as empty of any attributes, any permanence. This negation is balanced by the only positive thing you can say, which is that they are also *tathat~* or *buddhat~*, the very nature of Buddha. In later Buddhism, they become companion concepts.

Trik~ya

Within the first few hundred years of Dharma teaching there was an elaboration of the understanding of who the Buddha was. Initially, there was only one Buddha in the Buddhist tradition, the historical Shakyamuni. However, even during his lifetime, he made the distinction between himself as the enlightened, historical individual, on one hand, and himself as the Embodiment of Truth, on the other. The enlightened personality, the physical body, was known as the 'Rupa-k~ya' (Form-body) or 'Nirmana-k~ya' (Manifestation-body). (If you remember your skandha theory, you recall that, according to Buddhist psychology, *rupa*, (form), is the first manifestation of individuality in conditioned existence.)

On the other hand, the principle of Enlightenment which is embodied in him is known as Dharma-kaya or Truth-body. This is the essence of what it means to be Buddha and

is independent of the person realizing it. 'Dharma' in this expression means 'Truth', and does not refer to the verbal teachings which were recorded down in scriptures. The teaching of the Buddha also emanates from the 'Essence' or 'Truth'.

In the Buddha's lifetime, both the Nirmana-k~ya and the Dharma-k~ya were united in his identity. However, after his *Parinirvana*, (final Stage of Awakening, i.e. his earthly death), the distinction became more pronounced, especially in the Mahayana philosophy. His Manifestation-body was dead and enshrined in the form of relics in *stupas* (relic mounds). His Dharma-body is eternally present.

Later, the Mahayana philosophy developed the idea of a 'Sambhoga-k~ya', the Enjoyment-body. The Sambhoga-k~ya can be considered as the body or aspect through which the Buddha enjoyed himself in the Dharma, in teaching the Truth, in leading others to the realization of the Truth, and in enjoying the company of good, noble people. This is a selfless, pure, spiritual enjoyment, not to be confused with sensual pleasure. This 'Enjoyment-body' is not categorically mentioned in Theravada texts although it can be appreciated without contradiction if understood in this context. In Mahayana, the Enjoyment-body of the Buddha, unlike the impersonal, abstract principle of the Dharma-k~ya, is also considered as a person, though not a human, historical person.

It is clear that the early Theravadins conceived Buddha's Rupa-k~ya or Sambhoga-k~ya as that of a human being, and his Dharma-k~ya as the collection of his Dharma, that is, doctrines and disciplinary rules, collectively.

By the 5th century, Mahayana, such as Tien-tai (later to become Japanese Tendai) and most Tibetan schools continue to use the tri-k~ya

doctrine but insist that the three bodies are mutually identical and form one "uncreated, abiding *honzon* (object of practice)" wherein all Buddhas are one and non-differentiated. The main point they made, however, was that, Buddha, mind, and sentient beings are not separate realities and the Buddha is thus always seen in his relationship to the minds of "wayfarers" towards him. The Buddha is then first and foremost the dynamic intentionality of the Buddhist practitioner or the goal he aspires to.

Summary

As always, we must remember that Dharma teaching traveled thousands of miles and years to get to us here today. It was sincerely studied and interpreted by

some of the greatest philosophical minds in world history. These are not trivial or accidental and certainly not quaint historical idiosyncrasies. These are the most honest and conscientious efforts to make meaning out of difficult and complex ideas, teachings and experiences. We must always strive to find some way to make sense of these for our practice today, and we must appreciate that we will need to leave an opening for ever more refined and subtle ways to understand the Dharma.

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