

On the *Tri-Kaya*

Part 1 of 3

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June 12, 1971

I propose to present a discussion of the subject of the *Tri-Kaya*. This is not to be understood as in any sense authoritarian, but rather a search by the process of thought for a better understanding and correlation of these elements for our understanding.

It is a teaching of Buddhism that there are three “vestures” or “robes,” as they are called, through which or by means of which consciousness can function on different levels. These vestures are to be regarded as vestures of a Buddha—not the instruments of action of the ordinary human being. And here an initial point must be made. It is a teaching that the ultimate nature of which all creatures are formed is, in fact, Buddha-nature; and thus every creature, human and otherwise, is in a hidden sense Buddha already. But this has generally been obscured so that we move in a consciousness which may be called non-Buddha, or the ignorance—the state of *avidya*. From this state, redemption consists, essentially, in an awakening to the essential Buddha-Nature of which we are composed. He who has thus awakened becomes, in some degree, Buddha. It may be a minor degree, and there is in the literature statements that indicate that there are several steps from the first identification with Buddha, in the sense of Enlightenment, to the ultimate of a complete or seven-principled Buddha. The conception of the *Tri-Kaya* is connected with the enrobement or instrumentation by which an awakened Buddha functions.

The three vestures, starting with the one that is most objective and ascending to that which is most subjective are as follows: first, *Nirmanakaya*; second, *Sambhogakaya*; and third, *Dharmakaya*. The nature of these are only partially revealed in the literature, but we can see a certain correspondence with another trinity of fields, or worlds, or conditions, or states. These are *Sangsa*, *Nirvana*, and *Paranirvana*.

Throughout the teachings of the Great Buddha, there is manifest emphasis of what we might call three-ness. It is very characteristic in the *sutras* to find the Buddha represented as stating over and over again fundamental things by a repetition three times. The effect of this is to impress on one that there is a high importance attaching to the notion of three-ness. And, in part, I think we can see why this should be so, for if we view the description of consciousness as we know it, it takes this form: an object of consciousness which is known by a subject to consciousness, and a third element consists of the consciousness itself. It may be stated in the form: the perceived, the perceiver, and the perception. This is at the very root of cognition itself, and therefore gives us a reason for seeing why three, as such, is important. Also, three-ness is evident in the Hegelian dialectic. The thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis are all required to produce a ultimate, coherent, interconnected, balanced state. Duality is not an ultimate, but requires the integration by a third element. I think we are justified in viewing this particular form as indeed most fundamental of all. From this three-ness we can derive by the use of combinations of these elements one at a time, two at a time, and three at a

time, the notion of sevenfoldness so that sevenfoldness is derivative. Three-ness is primary or fundamental.

Now, taking the three vestures and combining them with the three fields of action, it would seem that we have this correspondence: that *Nirmanakaya* corresponds to *Sangsara*, for it is clearly emphasized that in the *Nirmanakayic* robe the Buddha is conscious of phenomena, and *Sangsara* is the world or zone of phenomenal content; on the other hand, and diametrically opposite to this, we have that which is the subject, the cognizing power, and this would appear to correspond to the *Dharmakaya*, and in turn to the state of *Nirvana* which is the complementary opposite of *Sangsara*; that which integrates these two is given as *Paranirvana*, and although I had viewed it otherwise in a previous statement,¹ it would appear that the *Sambhogakaya* corresponds to this: a robe or vesture not so objective as the *Nirmanakaya* nor so subjective as the *Dharmakaya*, but participating in both so that it is the ultimate integrating vesture. This, however, I have not found in any literature. It is my suggested formulation, and nothing authoritative is claimed for it. But it does have a clarifying effect, as we shall see later.

Let us consider these three vestures in the following order: first, the *Nirmanakaya*. One gathers the impression from the study of the literature that the *Nirmanakaya* is, in part at any rate, the astral body, or *linga sharira*, without the outermost rind known as the gross physical body. Here a notion should be introduced that may be pertinent. In the ordinary discussion of the psycho-physical constitution of a human being, the *linga sharira*, or astral body, is a temporary sheath which lasts as long as the incarnation should have been. Death of a physical body may be premature, and in that case, this inner vehicle continues until the allotted time is finished, and it then passes through what is called a “second death.” But in the training associated with yoga, there is a different astral said to be produced, and this is called the “permanent astral.” Normally, according to the Buddhist literature, the full liberation that comes from Enlightenment rarely occurs during the life in which the individual definitely determines that he will seek Liberation or Enlightenment, but usually requires seven incarnations.² But in order that the steps taken in each of the incarnations preceding the last, or seventh, the material is not destroyed or lost to an inner memory, but retained so that, in one sense, the seven incarnations is a single span without the deep interludes of a *devachanic* rest. It would therefore appear that fundamental in the constitution of the *Nirmanakaya* is such an astral body or *linga sharira*. This is not ordinarily visible to those who dwell upon this plane. It is visible, at times, to those who have developed the power of clairvoyant vision. Therefore, in general, that which is known as the “*Nirmanakaya*” is an entity in a vesture

¹ See the audio recording “On the Meaning of Redemption”:

The thought occurs to me that there is a correlation between the *Tri-Kaya* and the three zones or states known as *Sangsara*, *Nirvana*, and *Paranirvana*, as follows: *Sangsara* corresponding to *Nirmanakaya*; *Nirvana* to *Sambhogakaya*, and *Paranirvana* or *Paranishpanna* to *Dharmakaya*.

² H. P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence* (Pasadena, Calif.: Theosophical University Press, 1946), 69:

Calm and unmoved the Pilgrim glideth up the stream that to Nirvana leads. He knoweth that the more his feet will bleed, the whiter will himself be washed. He knoweth well that after seven short and fleeting births Nirvana will be his . . .

that is invisible to ordinary sight, but nonetheless concerned with the problems of the objective world, which presumptively can be quite conscious of what is transpiring here among the members of embodied humanity.

There arises here a question. What is that particular zone which is the dwelling place normal to the *Nirmanakaya*? In the eschatology connected with the Theosophical movement, there is a zone known as *kamaloka*, where the departed, normally, passes but a limited period. This is the zone which in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is called the *bardo*. It is not anything like a permanent dwelling place. We might view it, therefore, as a sort of vestibule leading to other zones or *lokas* of consciousness, both of a painful and a pleasant sort, and even of a very exalted nature, but not itself an actual, adequate dwelling place for any entity.

It has been said that there is a zone known as the “subtle world,” which is in part physical, but physical in a sense that is not visible to ordinary vision, where those who are guiding the evolution of humanity actually dwell. This suggestion helps to fill a gap in a form that is satisfactory. *Kamaloka* is an unsatisfactory dwelling place, but the subtle world, as it has been described to me, would be a preeminently satisfactory place for those who though unseen yet are concerned with the problems of objective humanity. So I would suggest that it is in this zone that the *Nirmanakaya* actually dwells. What the further composition of this vesture may be is not yet clear. It is presumptively more than merely astral, but it must involve the astral, since there is life here, and the astral, it is said, is the necessary vehicle of the life principle. And there also is implied the point that any living organism, subtle or gross, needs nutrition, needs an energy replenishment. But whereas he who dwells in a gross physical body secures this nutrition from physical food, vegetable or animal, it has been said that these who dwell on a subtle level take their energy directly from root sources without the use of anything like gross, material food. They are clearly in a realm where transportation or communication with different portions of space is not dependent upon the means characteristic of this physical plane. It would appear that simply by the mind and will such entities can be transported with exceeding speed from one place to another as the need may be. The important point to remember is that this is an unseen instrument of cognition and action which can be occupied with external problems though remaining unseen.

There is reason to believe that the *Nirmanakaya* vesture is actually more than an astral vesture, but even consists of an unseen, subtle physical component. Technically the meaning of the word *Nirmanakaya* is “the Body of Transformation”³ and what is suggested here is that something subtle of the physical is transformed into the composition of the *Nirmanakaya*, or something like a process of transubstantiation, taken in the root meaning of transforming one state of matter to another, not in the sense of the Catholic dogma.⁴ This would, therefore, seem of necessity to require effort upon the part of the candidate, and on this point the literature seems to be incomplete so far as I am familiar with it. It has been said of one who was preparing to assimilate to himself the *Nirmanakayic* robe that he had to withdraw from outer activity concerned with any

³ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 12.

⁴ See the audio recordings “Statement Regarding Transubstantiation,” parts 1 and 2, for a more complete formulation of this thesis.

causes, for he had the labor to perform in connection with this attainment. Incidentally, this sounds very much like certain steps reported in the article, “The ‘Elixir of Life,’” which was published in an early number of *The Theosophist*.⁵

In this connection we have two possibilities. According to a statement in the section called “The Mystery of [the] Buddha”,⁶ it is stated that there are two ways by which the *Nirmanakaya* is attained: one is through reaching to a state of consciousness that stands somewhat below that of *Nirvana*; and the second is an achievement of that state which is called the vestibule to *Nirvana*, and then the renunciation of that glorious Consciousness which is known as *Nirvana*. What is involved in these two cases could well suggest that a different sort of effort is involved. Possibly, in the first case, a definite and difficult effort upon the *sadhaka* would be required; whereas, the effort would not be equally difficult if there were the step taken known as the Great Renunciation by one who had attained the vestibule of *Nirvana*. The renunciation becoming in itself an essential part of the effort required, whereas in the first case renunciation would not seem to be involved.

The best material that we have, so far as I know it, on the subject of the Great Renunciation is to be found in *The Voice of the Silence* which is said to come from the *Book of [the] Golden Precepts*, a very ancient Buddhistic source. The material is to be found in the third section of this little *sutra*, the portion known as “The Seven Portals” and most particularly the very last portion. To bring this before our consciousness in clear form at this time, I shall read a few pages at the very terminus of this book. This is as follows:

Know, Conqueror of Sins, once that a Sowanee hath cross'd the seventh Path, all Nature thrills with joyous awe and feels subdued. The silver star now twinkles out the news to the night-blossoms, the streamlet to the pebbles ripples out the tale; dark ocean waves will roar it to the rocks surf-bound, scent-laden breezes sing it to the vales, and stately pines mysteriously whisper: “A Master has arisen, a MASTER OF THE DAY”.

He standeth now like a white pillar to the west, upon whose face the rising Sun of thought eternal poureth forth its first most glorious waves. His mind, like a becalmed and boundless ocean, spreadeth out in shoreless space. He holdeth life and death in his strong hand.

Yea, He is mighty. The living power made free in him, that power which is HIMSELF, can raise the tabernacle of illusion high above the gods, above great Brahm and Indra. *Now* he shall surely reach his great reward!

Shall he not use the gifts which it confers for his own rest and bliss, his well-earn'd weal and glory—he, the subduer of the Great Delusion?

⁵ G. M. (Godolphin Mitford?), “The ‘Elixir of Life,’” parts 1 and 2, *The Theosophist* 3, no. 6 (March 1882): 140-142 and no. 7 (April 1882): 168-171.

⁶ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* vol. 3 (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophy Co., 1910), 376.

Nay, O thou candidate for Nature's hidden lore! If one would follow in the steps of holy Tathagata, those gifts and powers are not for Self.

Would'st thou thus dam the waters born on Sumeru? Shalt thou divert the stream for thine own sake, or send it back to its prime source along the crests of cycles?

If thou would'st have that stream of hard-earn'd knowledge, of Wisdom heaven-born, remain sweet running waters, thou should'st not leave it to become a stagnant pond.

Know, if of Amitabha, the "Boundless Age," thou would'st become co-worker, then must thou shed the light acquired, like to the Bodhisattvas twain, upon the span of all three worlds.

Know that the stream of superhuman knowledge and the Deva-Wisdom thou hast won, must, from thyself, the channel of Alaya be poured forth into another bed.

Know, O Narjol, thou of the Secret Path, its pure fresh waters must be used to sweeter make the Ocean's bitter waves—that mighty sea of sorrow formed of the tears of men.

Alas! when once thou hast become like the fix'd star in highest heaven, that bright celestial orb must shine from out the spatial depths for all—save for itself; give light to all, but take from none.

Alas! when once thou hast become like the pure snow in mountain vales, cold and unfeeling to the touch, warm and protective to the seed that sleepeth deep beneath its bosom—'tis now that snow which must receive the biting frost, the northern blasts, thus shielding from their sharp and cruel tooth the earth that holds the promised harvest, the harvest that will feed the hungry.

Self-doomed to live through future Kalpas, unthanked and unperceived by men, wedged as a stone with countless other stones which form the "Guardian Wall," such is thy future if the seventh Gate thou passest. Built by the hands of many Masters of Compassion, raised by their tortures, by their blood cemented, it shields mankind, since man is man, protecting it from further and far greater misery and sorrow.

Withal man sees it not, will not perceive it, nor will he heed the word of Wisdom . . . for he knows it not.

But thou hast heard it; thou knowest all, O thou of eager, guileless Soul . . . and thou must choose. Then hearken yet again.

On Sowan's Path, O Srotapatti, thou art secure. Aye, on that Marga, where naught but darkness meets the weary pilgrim, where torn by thorns the hands drip blood, the feet are cut by sharp unyielding flints, and Mara wields his strongest arms—there lies a great reward *immediately* beyond.

Calm and unmoved the Pilgrim glideth up the stream that to Nirvana leads. He knoweth that the more his feet will bleed, the whiter will himself be washed. He knoweth well that after seven short and fleeting births Nirvana will be his . . .

Such is the Dhyana Path, the haven of the Yogi, the blessed goal that Srotapattis crave.

Not so when he hath crossed and won the Aryahata Path.

There Klesha is destroyed for ever, Tanha's roots torn out. But stay, Disciple . . . Yet one word. Canst thou destroy divine COMPASSION? Compassion is no attribute. It is the LAW of LAWS—eternal Harmony, Alaya's SELF; a shoreless universal essence, the light of everlasting Right, and fitness of all things, the law of love eternal.

The more thou dost become at one with it, thy being melted in its BEING, the more thy Soul unites with that which IS, the more thou wilt become COMPASSION ABSOLUTE.

Such is the Arya Path, Path of the Buddhas of perfection.

Withal, what mean the sacred scrolls which make thee say?

“OM! I believe it is not all the Arhats that get of the Nirvanic Path the sweet fruition.”

“OM! I believe that the Nirvana-Dharma is entered not by all the Buddhas.”

Yea; on the Arya Path thou art no more Srotapatti, thou art a Bodhisattva. The stream is cross'd. 'Tis true thou hast a right to Dharmakaya vesture; but Sambhogakaya is greater than a Nirvanee, and greater still is a Nirmanakaya—the Buddha of Compassion.

Now bend thy head and listen well, O Bodhisattva—Compassion speaks and saith: “Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?”

Now thou hast heard that which was said.

Thou shalt attain the seventh step and cross the gate of final knowledge, but only to wed woe—if thou would'st be Tathagata, follow upon thy predecessor's steps, remain unselfish till the endless end.

Thou art enlightened—Choose thy way.

Behold, the mellow light that floods the Eastern sky. In signs of praise both heaven and earth unite. And from the four-fold manifested Powers a chant of love ariseth, both from the flaming Fire and flowing Water, and from sweet-smelling Earth and rushing Wind.

Hark! . . . from the deep unfathomable vortex of that golden light in which the Victor bathes, ALL NATURE'S wordless voice in thousand tones ariseth to proclaim:

JOY UNTO YE, O MEN OF MYALBA.

A PILGRIM HATH RETURNED BACK “FROM THE OTHER SHORE.”

A NEW ARHAN IS BORN....

*Peace to all beings.*⁷

Thus is formulated in *The Voice of the Silence* the two paths, known as the *Dhyana* and the *Arya*, which may be chosen by the victorious pilgrim. But one, the path of *Dhyana*, leads to delight and the ceasing of all further incarnation for at least a great age; and the alternative, the *Arya* path, involves the renunciation of this great reward for the purpose of laboring with mankind. And this choice is presented as entirely free. There is no compulsion in it. It is wholly voluntary. To bring it forth in somewhat greater clarity, I shall read a footnote that explains it somewhat more clearly.

. . . popular reverence calls “Buddhas of Compassion” those *Bodhisattvas* who, having reached the rank of an Arhat, refuse to pass into the Nirvanic state or “don the *Dharmakaya* robe and cross to the other shore,” as it would then become beyond their power to assist men even so little as Karma permits. They prefer to remain invisibly in the world and contribute toward man’s salvation by influencing them to follow the Good Law, *i.e.*, lead them on the Path of Righteousness. It is part of the exoteric Northern Buddhism to honor all such great characters as Saints, and to offer even prayers to them, as the Greeks and Catholics do to their Saints and Patrons; on the other hand, the Esoteric teachings countenance no such thing. There is a great difference between the two teachings. The exoteric layman hardly knows the real meaning of the word *Nirmanakaya*—hence the confusion and inadequate explanations of the Orientalists. For example, Schlagintweit believes that *Nirmanakaya*-body means the physical form assumed by the Buddhas when they incarnate on earth—“the least sublime of their earthly encumbrances”—and he proceeds to give an entirely false view on the subject. The real teaching is, however, this:—

The three Buddhic bodies or forms are styled:—

1. *Nirmanakaya*.
2. *Sambhogakaya*.
3. *Dharmakaya*.

The first is that ethereal form which one would assume when leaving his physical he would appear in his astral body—having in addition all the knowledge of an Adept. The *Bodhisattva* develops it in himself as he proceeds on the Path. Having reached the goal and refused its fruition, he remains on Earth, as an Adept; and when he dies, instead of going into Nirvana, he remains in that glorious body he has woven for himself, *invisible* to uninitiated mankind, to watch over and protect it.

⁷ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence* Pasadena, Calif.: Theosophical University Press, 1946), 65-72.

Sambhogakaya is the same, but with the additional lustre of “three perfections,” one of which is entire obliteration of all earthly concerns.

The *Dharmakaya* body is that of a complete Buddha, *i.e.*, no body at all, but an ideal breath: Consciousness merged in the Universal Consciousness or Soul devoid of every attribute. Once a *Dharmakaya*, an Adept or Buddha leaves behind every possible relation with, or thought for, this earth. Thus, to be enabled to help humanity, an Adept who has won the right to Nirvana, “renounces the *Dharmakaya* body” in mystic parlance; keeps of the *Sambhogakaya* only the great and complete knowledge, and remains in his *Nirmanakaya* body. The Esoteric School teaches that Gautama Buddha, with several of his Arhats, is such a *Nirmanakaya*, higher than whom, on account of the great renunciation and sacrifice [for] to mankind, there is none known.”⁸

This gives us what would seem to be a very clear picture of the possibilities which lie before the candidate who has attained Enlightenment. On one hand, he may accept the *nirvanic* withdrawal, and thus be unaffected thereafter, at least for a great age, by all the turmoil and suffering that belongs to the universe of objects, or the *Sangsara*, or the phenomenal field of consciousness; or, he may turn his back upon this reward and take a certain subtle vehicle of consciousness and action which leaves him within the sphere of all creatures, human and otherwise, and able to work with such creatures within the limits permitted by *karma* to affect their progress toward the liberating Realization itself. But in doing this, he has renounced his own delight, and takes on something of the suffering of these creatures, for, indeed, one can deal with human problems, and the problems of others, only by acquaintance with those problems—and that acquaintance not in the purely academic sense, but in the sense of knowing them immediately. And it is possible by a certain power to affect a superposition of one’s own consciousness upon the consciousness of other entities; and in the case of those who are suffering in *Sangsara*, this implies a certain participation in that suffering, though it is not native to the individual himself. We might call this a vicarious type of suffering, which, however, must not be confused with the traditional doctrine of a vicarious redemption, something which we are given to understand is an impossibility.

Now, this implies a certain kind of objective life, as has already been pointed out, but in an unseen form except for those who have a certain capacity of clairvoyant perception. It means to go unknown and therefore unthanked, unrecognized; and the implication is that this is for a great age. The text says for “*Kalpas*,” and by *Kalpa* is meant a “period of a mundane revolution, generally a cycle of time, but usually, it represents a “day” and “night” of Brahma, a period of 4,320,000,000 years.”⁹ Now, this to our ordinary consciousness may seem positively appalling, but to bring the matter within a more reasonable compass, let us think of a million years. From the standpoint of the ordinary human sense of time, this is quite appalling enough; but we’re not now dealing with the ordinary human consciousness, and mayhap time on the level of the *Nirmanakaya* may

⁸ Ibid., 95-97.

⁹ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Co., 1892), 170.

have a very different meaning from what it has for us here. Even the time of an ordinary human life may seem appallingly long from the perspective of the insect that lives for but a day. And so this should be borne in mind. I do not really think that it can all be that bad as it does appear to our ordinary human consciousness. There are other considerations that I'll take up later that may indicate that not all the story is told here.

The end of the first part.