

On the *Tri-Kaya*

Part 2 of 3

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June 1971

We'll start now with Part 2.

In the previous discussion on the subject of the *Tri-Kaya*, we concluded with the formulation of that step which is called the Great Renunciation. The point being made that if the *sadhaka* took the opportunity that was presented before him and accepted the *nirvanic* state in the *Dharmakaya* body, he would be isolated in his consciousness and memory from all the experiences of that which we know variously as *Sangsa*, the universe of objects, and the evolution; that he would continue in a state of unimaginable bliss and wisdom and power but in an all-inclusive and essentially inactive condition.

This is not the whole of the story. There is another source that gives us a picture of a somewhat different sort. This is the book known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. There is an important difference between the point of view that is being maintained in *The Voice of the Silence* and that which we find in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The Voice of the Silence deals with the steps of the *sadhaka* who has become *Srotapatti*, namely, who is traveling up the ladder or the path that leads to *Nirvana* or the Great Renunciation—one or the other. This is a course which, as has been pointed out, normally requires seven incarnations, though not necessarily so. Now, it has been pointed out in the literature that certain great ones, especially the Great Buddha, attained to *Nirvana* during life and then, it is even said, entered *Nirvana* after death, leaving his remains, namely his *Nirmanakaya*, at least, to work among men. There is implied here two senses in which *Nirvana* may be attained: the first sense, as the reward or goal of a conscious effort of the *sadhaka* where the attainment occurs during life. But there is another way, and that is developed in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, where the door is presented as opening to all creatures at the moment of death to accept the Great Liberation if it is in their power to do so. And the presentation of the subject from this latter point of view involves a certain group of differentiations from the previous statement in *The Voice of the Silence* that will be very interesting for our consideration.

It is assumed in these discourses that the material in *The Voice of the Silence* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is authoritative, but that there may be difficulty in arriving at a true understanding because of a difference between the conceptuality of the time when the books were written and our present-day conceptual understanding. To bridge this gulf, there are numerous footnotes in both books that are of superior value in aiding us in our understanding. I shall present, now, my understanding of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* insofar as it is pertinent for our present purposes. I shall not go into much of the detail that applies simply to the ordinary individual who is totally unable to take the great step of acceptance of the Clear Light, but only that portion will interest us that is concerned with the acceptance of one or another of the vestures.

Considering *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a whole, it is said in one of the footnotes that the central text is very ancient, much older than the Buddhism that claims its descent from Gautama Buddha; in fact, probably contemporary with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. But if this is so, the text has been adapted to the Buddhistic line of thought so that it is today predominantly a Buddhistic work. It deals very definitely with the conceptions of *Sangara* and *Nirvana*, and the conception of the *Nirmanakaya*, *Sambhogakaya*, and *Dharmakaya* robes. One of the primary statements is concerning how this material is known. It is said that certain advanced entities, in the sense of having achieved yoga and certain powers associated with yoga, have gone over the ground and reported it back to their disciples. There is one method by which this might be conceivably done which is not too far beyond our understanding: that is by the method of superposition of one's own consciousness upon that of another who is passing through the states. I've already spoken of this at an earlier part in the discourse. In such case, the one who superimposed his consciousness upon the dying individual and his progress through the *Bardo*, would learn of those steps and could confirm the truth of the general thesis presented in the book.

A schematic statement of the pattern is as follows: disregarding all that is said about the signs of dying and what is said about the instructor or guide who repeats the words of the book to the dying one, we will cover the main steps. When one dies, it is here said, he enters a condition, or place, or state, which is called the *Bardo*. He is actually occupying a vehicle which is unseen to ordinary sight, yet has the same shape and appearance as the outer vehicle which he has just left. It is said to consist of what is known as the astral body, or *linga sharira*, and can be seen by one who has the appropriate clairvoyant vision. Immediately at the point of death, he enters the highest of three stages in the *Bardo*. These stages are known as *Chikhai*, second, *Chonyid*, and third, *Sidpa*. At the very moment of death itself, he faces the highest possibility, the purest form of what is known as the Clear Light. And by the Clear Light, we must understand the non-phenomenal consciousness which is characteristic of *Nirvana*; in other words, a consciousness without content, save in the sense that it is colored by a most intense delight. About the time of a meal, as it is given in the text, or say thirty minutes, there is a second presentation of the Clear Light at a somewhat lower level, but still in the *Bardo* of the *Chikhai*. If the *sadhaka* is able to accept the Clear Light which is presented to him, and finds himself able to remain in it, he attains the vesture of the *Dharmakaya*. If he cannot, in either of these first two steps, then there is a presentation to him of a somewhat lower level of the *Bardo* called the *Chonyid*. In this an extended period of time elapses. In the text it is given as on the order of fourteen days. And during this period there are given something like five or six opportunities to accept the Clear Light in a lower form, and if he does so, then he attains the *Sambhogakaya* vesture. But if he fails to take this step, then he drops to a still lower stage of the *Bardo* known as the *Sidpa*, and in this he still has the opportunity of accepting a still less pure, less exalted form of the Clear Light, and if this he does accept, then he attains the vesture of the *Nirmanakaya*.

If an individual takes the Clear Light in the *Chikhai*, he has no further obligation of incarnation. He has completed his *karmic* journey. If he were to incarnate from that, it would be wholly voluntary. If he accepts the Clear Light, and his identification with it, in the *Chonyid*, then there is one more, at least one more, obligatory incarnation in which he has the opportunity of taking the Clear Light in the highest sense and attaining the

Dharmakayic robe. If he does not accept the Clear Light until the third, or *Sidpa* stage of the *Bardo*, then he attains to the *Nirmanakaya* and faces yet at least two more obligatory incarnations in which he has the opportunity to achieve the full Liberation and Enlightenment. The dying one who fails to take the Clear Light on any one of these four stages, the first two in the *Chikhai*, and a series of opportunities in the *Chonyid*, at least five or six, and at least one in the *Sidpa*, then he goes on down into lower states of consciousness still in the *Bardo*.

In the case of the *Chikhai*, there is no problem of the presentation of appearances that are actually projections of the individual, but beginning with the first entering of the *Chonyid* stage, appearances come which are here called the beneficent gods and the gods of wrath, which, we are warned, are not really external entities, but are projections from oneself, and is the beginning of a state of essential delusion or the threat of delusion. The dying one has been, meanwhile, under instruction by some guide who is close to him, and warned as to what will be happening to him. There is a problem here as pointed out in the text of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It is said that the mind, after having lost the physical body, tends to be unsteady. It is not clear to me, so far as I have been able to determine, whether the mind in this case is understood in the sense of the sense mind, or in the sense of the true intellectual mind, that which Sri Aurobindo calls the *Buddhi*, or the pure reason. If it is only the sense mind, then it is clear why this mind should become unsteady, for it does not have the steadying effect of the physical sense organs. There is, therefore, something in the mental process that would appear to be quite akin to that which we experience in our dream states where the mind is a very untrustworthy instrument. At any rate, there is a constant reminding of the dying one, in the Tibetan practice, as to what he's passing through, so that he is given help. This is because he can still hear instruction even though he no longer has any relationship with his physical body.

After passing beyond the last manifestation of the Clear Light in the *Sidpa*, he enters into very inferior regions where, it is said, the environment is much determined by his own preconceptions which are projected and the pattern here varies with the training of the individual in his previous life. One who was brought up as a traditional Christian, let us say of the Catholic faith, would have experience of certain purgatory regions and of certain characteristic after-conditions that are in harmony with the teachings he experienced during life. The Protestant would have a variant which was according to his preconditioning by the instruction given to him. And here it may be a matter of importance to suggest that the instruction given to children early in life may have a large determinant part in the form the environment takes in the unconscious projection in these after-state conditions. It would seem almost better to have not had any specific religious teaching in the form of the preconception of after-death states, for these preconceptions are evidently what one actually experiences and here he is simply kidding himself. To enter the state without any preconception would seem to have its advantages. However, our concern is not with the lower levels of the *Bardo*, the levels where in fact the vast bulk of humanity ultimately passes and from which that humanity can enter into various states or *lokas* reaching from very severe hellish conditions up to rather exalted heaven worlds and other *lokas* that are related to human life, or to sub-human forms of life, or are of a nature connected with forms that are non-human but spiritually superior to that of man. And then finally, at its lowest outcome, the *Bardo* leads to rebirth. We are

concerned only with the early stages and most of all with the two first steps in the *Chikhai*. We are now assuming an individual who has reached the point in his evolution where he can take the step that implies Buddhahood.

To present the standpoint of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* with respect to the confrontation with the first and highest form of the Clear Light, I shall quote from the text itself two or three pages. There is assumed present someone who is competent in this field, such as a lama, a guru, or whatnot, who is speaking to the dying individual and reading the text so as to remind him. And starting on p. 94, the text is as follows:

O nobly-born, that which is called death being come to thee now, resolve thus: ‘O this now is the hour of death. By taking advantage of this death, I will so act, for the good of all sentient beings, peopling the illimitable expanse of the heavens, as to obtain the Perfect Buddhahood, by resolving on love and compassion towards [them, and by directing my entire effort to] the Sole Perfection.’

Shaping the thoughts thus, especially at this time when the *Dharma-Kaya* of Clear Light [in the state] after death can be realized for the benefit of all sentient beings, know that thou art in that state; [and resolve] that thou wilt obtain the best boon of the State of the Great Symbol, in which thou art, [as follows]:

‘Even if I cannot realize it, yet will I know this *Bardo*, and, mastering the Great Body of Union in *Bardo*, will appear in whatever [shape] will benefit [all beings] whomsoever: I will serve all sentient beings, infinite in number as are the limits of the sky.’

Keeping thyself unseparated from this resolution, thou shouldst try to remember whatever devotional practices thou wert accustomed to perform during thy lifetime.

In saying this, the reader shall put his lips close to the ear, and shall repeat it distinctly, clearly impressing it upon the dying person so as to prevent his mind from wandering even for a moment.

After the expiration hath completely ceased, press the nerve of sleep firmly; and, a *lama*, or a person higher or more learned than thyself, impress in these words, thus:

Reverend Sir, now that thou art experiencing the Fundamental Clear Light, try to abide in that state which now thou art experiencing.

And also in the case of any other person the reader shall set him face-to-face thus:

O nobly-born (so-and-so), listen. Now thou art experiencing the Radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality. Recognize it. O nobly-born, thy present intellect, in real nature void, not formed into anything as regards characteristics or colour, naturally void, is the very Reality, the All-Good.

Thine own intellect, which is now voidness, yet not to be regarded as of the voidness of nothingness, but as being the intellect itself, unobstructed, shining, thrilling, and blissful, is the very consciousness, the All-good Buddha.

Thine own consciousness, not formed into anything, in reality void, and the intellect, shining and blissful,—these two,—are inseparable. The union of them is the *Dharma-Kaya* state of Perfect Enlightenment.

Thine own consciousness, shining, void, and inseparable from the Great Body of Radiance, hath no birth, nor death, and is the Immutable Light—Buddha Amitabha.

Knowing this is sufficient. Recognizing the voidness of thine own intellect to be Buddhahood, and looking upon it as being thine own consciousness, is to keep thyself in the [state of the] divine mind of the Buddha.

Repeat this distinctly and clearly three or [even] seven times. That will recall to the mind [of the dying one] the former [*i.e.*, when living] setting-face-to-face by the *guru*. Secondly, it will cause the naked consciousness to be recognized as the Clear Light; and, thirdly, recognizing one's own self [thus], one becometh permanently united with the *Dharma-Kaya* and Liberation will be certain.¹

End of the first portion of the *Chikhai*. Note especially, two sentences occurring in the first part of the quotation:

By taking advantage of this death, I will so act, for the good of all sentient beings, peopling the illimitable expanse of the heavens, as to obtain the Perfect Buddhahood, by resolving on love and compassion towards [them, and by directing my entire effort to] the Sole Perfection.

Shaping the thoughts thus, especially at this time when the *Dharma-Kaya* of Clear Light [in the state] after death can be realized for the benefit of all sentient beings, know that thou art in that state; [and resolve] that thou wilt obtain the best boon of the State of the Great Symbol, in which thou art.²

Now, what is said here and urged is that one, at the moment of death when the primary Clear Light is present, that one should accept it for the good of all creatures and resolve on compassion and love of those creatures, putting forth also the effort for the Sole Perfection, seems clearly to mean that the act or the achievement of acceptance of the Clear Light of the *Dharmakaya* is itself a service, even a major service, and perhaps the supreme service to all creatures.

Here, then, is a statement that stands in rather radical contrast to the position formulated in *The Voice of the Silence* where one is admonished to renounce the

¹ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 94-97.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

Dharmakaya in the name of the service of all creatures. There would seem here to be almost something like a radical contradiction, but there is this possibility, for you'll note that in both cases there is an emphasis on the principle of compassion and love for all creatures. In one case, one is admonished because of that compassion and love to make the Great Renunciation which is defined as the renunciation of the *Dharmakaya*; in the other case, for the same reason, namely, the love and compassion for all creatures, there is an urging to accept the *Dharmakaya* so that this may be achieved. And if you'll note further, it goes on to say:

Even if I cannot realize it, yet will I know this *Bardo*, and, mastering the Great Body of Union in *Bardo*, will appear in whatever [shape] will benefit [all beings] whomsoever . . .³

There is a footnote here that goes as follows:

Literally rendered it is, 'will appear in whatever will subdue [for beneficial ends] whomsoever'. To subdue in this sense any sentient being of the human world, a form which will appeal religiously to that being is assumed. Thus, to appeal to a Shaivite devotee, the form of Shiva is assumed; to a Buddhist, the form of the Buddha Shakyamuni; to a Christian, the form of Jesus; to a Moslem, the form of the Prophet; and so on for other religious devotees; and for all manners and conditions of mankind a form appropriate to the occasion—for example, for subduing children, parents, and vice versa; for *shishyas*, *gurus* and vice versa; for common people, kings or rulers; and for kings, ministers of state.⁴

Now, here associated with the assimilation of the *Dharmakaya*, there is presented a field of action which involves actual entities in the world, and thus the *Dharmakaya* is not viewed as cutting one off from those entities; whereas, it is so viewed in *The Voice of the Silence*. In *The Voice of the Silence*, this action of appearing before people in the appropriate forms that they expect would be a function of the *Nirmanakaya*.

Now, here is a thought that appears to me: if in one case the *Dharmakaya* state and enrobement was achieved as the result of wisdom unassociated with compassion, it could lead to a separation from all activity in the world about, and thus be a lost influence so far as humanity and other creatures are concerned. On the other hand, if the *Dharmakaya* is achieved by the combination of these two elements, namely, on love and compassion towards all creatures and a directing of one's effort at the same time to the Sole Perfection, a different result is attained. And here the suggestion comes to me, that in this case, not only is the *Dharmakaya* achieved, but actually a combination of all three of the *kayas*—in other words, the *Tri-Kaya*. We would then have to differentiate between two possible positions: one in which the individual reaches the position where it's a choice between the *Dharmakaya* and the *Nirmanakaya*, and in a still more

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 94-95.

advanced position where there can be an attainment of the *Tri-Kaya*, so that the individual is *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya*, and *Nirmanakaya* at the same time. And this, indeed, would be the complete fulfillment—a most adequate state of consciousness indeed. And there would be no question of a Great Renunciation for millions of years, but a movement in a consciousness that can deal in all three domains: of the *Sangsara*, or the world about, of the *Nirvana*, and of the *Paranirvana*. This, indeed, would be a most satisfactory consciousness.

Now, is such a threefold vesture in principle possible? I direct your attention to this consideration: first, that the three forms, or vestures, are predicated as existing in the macrocosm; secondly, that it is affirmed that the microcosm has potentially in it all that is in the macrocosm; therefore, the microcosmic Realization of the three vestures is, in principle, possible.

I direct your attention again to a brief paragraph that was part of the general quotation from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Note this especially:

Thine own consciousness, not formed into anything, in reality void, and the intellect, shining and blissful,—these two,—are inseparable. The union of them is the *Dharma-Kaya* state of Perfect Enlightenment.⁵

The hearer has already noted, or at least if he has been alert he has noted, that in the quotation, the word ‘consciousness’ and the word ‘intellect’ were used, and these have a different reference. There is a footnote that explains their usage. They are employed to translate two Tibetan terms, namely, ‘*rig-pa*’ and ‘*shes-rig*’. There’s a footnote that explains the usage of the translator:

Rig-pa, meaning ‘consciousness’ as distinct from the knowing faculty by which it cognizes or knows itself to be. Ordinarily, *rig-pa* and *shes-rig* are synonymous; but in an abstruse philosophical treatise, as herein, *rig-pa* refers to the consciousness in its purest and most spiritual (i.e. supramundane) aspect, and *shes-rig* to the consciousness in that grosser aspect, not purely spiritual, whereby cognizance of phenomena is present.

In this part of the *Bardo Thodol* the psychological analysis of consciousness or mind is particularly abstruse. Wherever the text contains the word *rig-pa* we have rendered it as ‘consciousness’, and the word *shes-rig* as ‘intellect’; or else, to suit the context, *rig-pa* as ‘consciousness’, and *shes-rig* as ‘consciousness of phenomena’, which is ‘intellect’.⁶

Here we find material that needs to be studied at considerable length. It speaks of the consciousness, in the sense of *rig-pa*, as being in reality void. This term ‘void’, and ‘voidness’, and ‘emptiness’ is found extensively used throughout the Buddhistic *sutras*, and has a meaning, often, somewhat similar to that of ‘*maya*’ in the *Mayavada* of the Vedanta. But I have not, myself, found it a very helpful term. It may be viewed in this

⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁶ Ibid.

way: as equivalent to a consciousness which is without content and without a subject, which I have discussed at some length in *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. Because it is without content, it could be called void. I've dwelt on this elsewhere at some length,⁷ but this consciousness is to be viewed as non-created, as not made, as completely pure, as primordial, as self-existent, as that which is from which the subject to consciousness and the object of consciousness is derived. This is the fundamental, Universal Consciousness.

Shes-rig, on the other hand, as is pointed out in what I quoted, is consciousness in that sense that is aware of objects. And I would add, though this is not in the text, it involves the element of a *subject* that is aware. Now, this latter has been translated by the translator and the editor as "intellect," and the question arises as to whether this is a good translation. If one looks up the technical meaning of 'intellect', he will find that it has various usages by the various philosophers and psychologists. Among these there is one which I think is the most proper, most definitive, but which, nonetheless, could hardly render the word available for the present usage, and that is to restrict the word 'intellect' to that organ, function, or faculty which operates upon concepts and restrict it to that, so that the awareness of and operation upon perceptions would not be an intellectual activity.

I remind you of my threefold division of cognition into the three forms of perceptual cognition, conceptual cognition, and introceptual cognition. The introceptual would correspond very substantially with the conception of *rig-pa* here, namely, the Pure Consciousness. The intellect would be the organ for the functioning in connection with conceptual cognition, and only that. On the other hand, we could use the term that Aurobindo uses for identifying that aspect of the mind which deals with perceptions as the "sense mind," or *manas*. This sense mind is obviously something which man holds in common with the animals, but I agree with Aristotle, that the notion of an intellectual animal is not tenable. Only man can be intellectual. Only man deals with concepts. But man and animal, together, deal with perceptions from the senses.

Now, we have, then, the word 'phenomena' here. It is stated that *shes-rig* is that particular faculty or function which cognizes phenomena. Phenomena are, obviously, concerned with sense perceptions. But sense perceptions are not the only objects in consciousness; there are the concepts, the general notions, the universal ideas. And these may hardly correctly, in the strict sense, be called phenomena. They are rather representations, whereas, the phenomena are presentations. There is a creative act which goes into a representation. It is a product of mediation, or mediate thinking; whereas, the presentation or phenomenon proper is a something which happens immediately as it enters consciousness. In fact, the term 'intuition' has been extended by some thinkers to include these sense perceptions because of their immediacy.

Now, it is obvious from the context that *shes-rig* does embrace phenomena, therefore, the presentations of the senses. Does it embrace the representations or conceptions of the conceptual function? That is a question that is not clearly answered here. But I suspect that it does, for the reason that in both sensuous perception and

⁷ See the audio recording "Reading of 'The Prajñā-Pāramitā-Hridaya-Sūtra'."

conceptual cognition there is a dealing with a content in consciousness, and that the important contrast between *shes-rig* and *rig-pa* lies in the presence of content, in the first case, and an absence of content, in the second case. But in that case, we would have to use for *shes-rig* some term other than that of ‘intellect’. And I think that the alternative term used by the translator is very good, namely, “consciousness of phenomena”, if we extend the notion to include conceptual representations.

Now, the important point in this quotation of a positive sort is the statement that the union of them, namely, *rig-pa* and *shes-rig*, is the *Dharmakaya* state of Perfect Enlightenment. And in connection with this point, let us return to the quotation from *The Voice of the Silence* where the footnote speaks of the nature of the *Dharmakaya* body. It says, for instance:

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 . . .⁸

This statement seems to be virtually a duplication of the statement in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* where it says the union of *rig-pa* and *shes-rig* is the *Dharmakaya*; for *rig-pa* would be identical with Universal Consciousness, and the consciousness referred to in the footnote in *The Voice of the Silence* where it uses the word “. . . Consciousness merged in [the] Universal Consciousness . . .,” this consciousness would seem to identify with the *shes-rig*, the consciousness in the normal sense of a relationship in which there is a cognizance of phenomena or representations by a cognizer. Actually these statements give us a better understanding of the nature of the *Dharmakaya* than we have of either the *Nirmanakaya* or the *Sambhogakaya*. Although it is the most exalted, spiritually, of the three vestures, and presumptively, therefore, at the greatest distance from our ordinary understanding, yet, nonetheless, in a certain sense, it is the simplest of the three vestures, and more easily grasped. Although it is very subtle, it does not, however, have an element of complexity which grows as we move outward to that which is more objective. And I would say that here we have some understanding that should give us at least a faint grasp of the nature of the *Dharmakaya*. But note this, it includes *shes-rig*, and *shes-rig* is the power of consciousness that can be aware of phenomena. That would imply that the *Dharmakaya* is not locked in to a pure, Universal Consciousness where there is no content; that the power to be aware of a phenomenal universe is in principle present, and therefore, presumptively, can be exercised. This is something of a revolutionary point rather different from what most of us have tended to believe heretofore, namely, that the *Dharmakaya* is of necessity locked away from phenomenistic consciousness and functioning only within the limits of a non-phenomenistic consciousness.

Non-phenomenistic, or Universal Consciousness, does not involve the notion of entityhood at all. It is like a vast, illimitable sea with no differentiation or particularization at all, but only absolutely universal. It could be called “Buddha” in the most universal sense of the word that is the principle of underlying Enlightenment which spreads through all. But there would be no entityhood here. There is no way in which one

⁸ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence* (Pasadena, Calif.: Theosophical University Press, 1946), 96.

could speak of a multitude of Buddhas as entities, but only a Universal Buddha. Perhaps this is the meaning of *Adi-Buddha*. But when there is a combination of this Universal Consciousness with the particularizing consciousness of *shes-rig*, the consciousness that is aware of phenomena and of representations, then the union introduces the possibility of entityhood, and would enable us to speak of Buddhas in the plural number.

End of Part 2.