

Sambhogakaya

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Sambhogakaya means the Body of Enjoyment or spiritual fruition. In Blavatsky's explanation of the three Buddhist vestures, its distinctive features are perfected knowledge and the additional lustre of three perfections, including release from earthly concerns. *Dharmakaya* names formless realization beyond attributes; *Nirmanakaya* names the compassionate vesture through which an Adept remains available to humanity. *Sambhogakaya* occupies a different place in this account: it brings the question of spiritual fulfillment into sharp relation with the continuing needs of the world.

Enjoyment here must be understood with care. The term does not refer to the personality receiving exquisite sensations, nor to an agreeable mood during meditation. It concerns a level of attainment far beyond ordinary experience. The word can nevertheless reveal a familiar temptation. We readily imagine that the purpose of every difficult undertaking is to reach a condition in which nothing further disturbs us. Spiritual aspiration can inherit that expectation unless we examine what we mean by fulfillment.

The image of a luminous robe is useful provided we remember that it is an image. *Kaya* is translated as body or vesture, but the teaching is not describing a garment that can be seen, purchased or claimed. Blavatsky's explanatory note in *The Voice of the Silence* discusses modes of spiritual being and their relation to knowledge, freedom and service. Her treatment distinguishes the three vestures without reducing them to layers of ordinary physical substance. The reader needs a more flexible conception than a stack of invisible bodies.

We also need to identify whose account we are reading. The Theosophical exposition here follows Blavatsky's stated esoteric interpretation. Her comments contrast it with other explanations current in her time. This particular ethical arrangement must not be silently projected upon all Buddhist uses of *Trikaya*. A comparative study would need to hear each tradition in its own terms. Within this essay, the governing question is the one *The Voice* raises about attainment and compassionate responsibility.

The most revealing detail is what the helping Adept retains. Blavatsky says that one who renounces the *Dharmakaya* body in order to aid humanity keeps the great and complete knowledge of *Sambhogakaya* and remains in the *Nirmanakaya* body. Knowledge is not thrown away as though wisdom itself obstructed compassion. The distinction falls upon exclusive fruition and release from earthly concerns. What has been learned becomes available for the work of helping rather than being enclosed within the enjoyment of attainment.

This makes the relationship among the vestures more subtle than a ranking of good and bad. *Sambhogakaya* should not be dismissed as an inferior form of pleasure, and *Nirmanakaya* should not be praised by emptying it of knowledge. The compassionate Adept helps through understanding. Blavatsky's emphasis places the worth of wisdom within the use made of it. The full significance of spiritual fruition is disclosed when we ask whether its capacities remain available to beings who have not reached that freedom.

Professor Iyer repeatedly joins wisdom with compassion. In his exposition of the Buddha's message, their connection is indissoluble. Compassion needs the discernment that prevents an eager helper from confusing personal anxiety with another person's need. Wisdom needs the widened concern that prevents knowledge from becoming a refuge of superiority. Read in this light, *Sambhogakaya* offers an opportunity to examine the relation between what nourishes consciousness and what consciousness is willing to give.

Ordinary joy has an honourable place in that examination. A beautiful piece of music, the understanding of a difficult idea, or the companionship of a trusted friend may refresh the mind and heart. The teaching does not require suspicion of every happiness. It invites us to notice when appreciation contracts into a demand that our chosen peace must never be interrupted. The problem then lies in possessiveness. We begin arranging other people around the preservation of our state instead of meeting them as fellow participants in life.

Imagine an experienced craftsperson who has finally mastered a difficult technique. There is legitimate joy in the precision of the work. A beginner asks for instruction, and teaching will require slowing down, explaining basic movements and accepting imperfect attempts. The craftsperson can preserve the pleasure of solitary excellence or let that excellence become a shared resource. Neither choice is a literal choice of a Buddhist vesture. The example simply makes visible the difference between enjoying a capacity and willingly placing it at another person's service.

When instruction is offered patiently, the delight in the craft need not disappear. It can become more generous. The teacher discovers how to communicate without humiliating the learner and how to encourage without concealing mistakes. This requires discernment about what the learner can absorb. It also requires relinquishing the wish to appear effortlessly superior. In such small acts, understanding acquires a wider purpose and joy becomes compatible with responsibility.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes the question from whether an experience fulfills me to what that fulfillment equips me to contribute. A period of retreat may restore attention for demanding work. Study may give language to someone else's confusion. An earned competence may become instruction that another person could not otherwise obtain. These

possibilities preserve the value of inward nourishment while placing it within the wider circulation of human need and capacity.

Human Solidarity asks that this circulation include people outside our preferred company. It is easy to share knowledge where admiration returns immediately. It takes more patience to remain helpful when gratitude is uncertain or progress slow. The Kwan Yin pledge, as Professor Iyer presents it, directs aspiration toward all living beings. A student may begin by making one useful capacity less dependent upon praise. The task is concrete enough to be tested and modest enough to reveal self-deception without theatrical vows of perfection.

The language of fruition also asks us to look at time. Years of preparation may culminate in a capacity that seems effortless to someone watching it. Recognizing that history can make us grateful for the conditions that allowed the capacity to grow: instruction, patient companions and opportunities made available by others. Such gratitude loosens the idea that accomplishment is exclusively ours. It can become a reason to make comparable opportunities available to another learner, respecting that person's pace instead of demanding an immediate reflection of our own success.

There is a corresponding discipline in meditation. We can appreciate an interval of clarity without turning it into a possession that must be reproduced. The wish to recover a pleasant state may become another distraction. The more useful inquiry concerns what has changed in conduct: whether attention is steadier, reactions less injurious, and help more discerning. These are ordinary tests of preparation. They should never be mistaken for proof that one of the great vestures has been attained.

The distinction gives a student room to appreciate real growth while remaining teachable. Gratitude for understanding is compatible with the recognition that its fullest possibilities are still to be discovered.

Sambhogakaya thus directs us toward the dignity and responsibility of fruition. A luminous robe suggests the richness of perfected capacities; Blavatsky's account of compassionate renunciation asks what those capacities can serve. We need not become hostile to joy in order to widen it. We can let understanding remain available, allow another person's growth to matter, and welcome a happiness that no longer depends upon guarding its boundaries. The light of accomplishment then becomes something by which others, too, may find their way.

Glossary

Anahata — Unstruck; in Professor Iyer's passage, the deathless heart-centre associated with the Soundless Sound.

Arhat — A being who has attained an advanced stage of spiritual realization; *Arhats* is the plural. Blavatsky uses the term in her explanation of the compassionate vestures.

Attribute — A quality assigned to something; in these essays, any predicate that would limit the Absolute if applied literally.

Avidya — Fundamental ignorance or mistaken identification, from which the other afflictions arise.

Bodhisattva — A being on the path of awakening and compassion. The sources distinguish human, metaphysical and hierarchical uses of the term.

Buddha — An awakened one; the title refers here particularly to Gautama and, more broadly, to perfected spiritual wisdom.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman*, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of *Manas*.

Chitkala — A ray or spark of consciousness; Professor Iyer associates it here with the developed disciple's inward perception.

Consummation — Completion or fulfillment; here, the culmination of spiritual development.

Dharmakaya — The Truth-Body; in Blavatsky's cited account, formless realization beyond attributes and earthly relations.

Dialectic — A disciplined inquiry through distinctions and related or opposed ideas; used in the quotation concerning wisdom and voidness.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening the frame of understanding to include more relations, perspectives, and responsibilities.

Esoteric — Concerning an inward or deeper teaching; the essays identify Blavatsky's particular interpretation rather than attributing it to every Buddhist school.

Finitizing — Reducing a conception to fixed limits; the quotation questions the mind's habitual narrowing of a universal idea.

Fruition — The fulfillment or result of development; used of spiritual attainment and its relation to compassionate service.

Human Solidarity — Shared human dignity and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility for others.

Initiation — A deepening of spiritual knowledge and corresponding capacities, distinguished from an outward ceremony alone.

Kaya — Body or vesture; in the present teaching, a designation for a mode of spiritual being, not an ordinary physical garment.

Kwan Yin — The figure of compassion called the Mother of Mercy and Knowledge; also the Divine Voice in the Theosophical symbolism discussed here.

Kwan Yin pledge — The bodhisattvic commitment described by Professor Iyer, directed toward the welfare and liberation of all beings.

Latency — A condition in which a possibility or power is present without differentiated expression; latent is the related adjective.

Mahakaruna — Great Compassion; unconditional compassion inseparable from *Prajna* or spiritual wisdom in Professor Iyer's teaching.

Mahat — Universal Mind or cosmic intelligence in Theosophical philosophy.

Nada — Spiritual sound; associated with the Soundless Sound in *The Voice of the Silence*.

Nirmanakaya — A transformed vesture; in Blavatsky's esoteric account, the condition retained by an Adept who remains available to help humanity after renouncing final nirvanic fruition.

Nirvana — Spiritual liberation; the quoted teaching considers its relation to *samsara* and the continuing practice of compassion.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories, and roles of a particular life, distinguished from the enduring individuality.

Plane — A level or mode of being or consciousness; not necessarily a location in physical space.

Prajna — Spiritual or intuitive insight; its precise level depends on the passage.

Prajnaparamita — The perfection of wisdom; the quoted passage refers to Buddhist texts exploring wisdom and its inseparability from compassion.

Renunciation — Relinquishment of selfish claims or attachment, so that thought and action can serve a wider purpose.

Sambhogakaya — The Body of Enjoyment or spiritual fruition; Blavatsky associates it with perfected knowledge and additional perfections, including freedom from earthly concerns.

Transcendence — Going beyond a particular set of limitations; transcendent and transcendental describe what exceeds ordinary conditioned experience.

Trikaya — The three Buddhist vestures: *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya* and *Nirmanakaya*. The essays follow Blavatsky's particular esoteric explanation.

Ubiquity — Presence everywhere; used of suffering in the quoted discussion of the vow.

Vesture — A robe or covering; in the three-kaya teaching, a symbolic designation of spiritual being or condition.

Vidya — Knowledge or wisdom; here, spiritual understanding or illumination.

Voidness — Freedom from limiting or separative conceptions in the quoted contemplative teaching; not merely vacant physical space.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Seven Portals", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 54.

"Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?"

Meditation thought: The cry of the world is placed beside the prospect of bliss. Let the question widen aspiration toward the beings whose suffering still calls for help.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Two Paths", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 25.

"Know, O beginner, this is the Open PATH, the way to selfish bliss, shunned by the Bodhisattvas of the "Secret Heart," the Buddhas of Compassion."

Meditation thought: The contrast belongs to the ethical teaching of The Voice. Preserve its source context while examining the attraction of a peace reserved entirely for oneself.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Two Paths", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 25.

"To don *Nirmanakaya*'s humble robe is to forego eternal bliss for Self, to help on man's salvation."

Meditation thought: The humble robe directs admiration toward service without display. Consider one useful capacity that could be offered with less dependence upon recognition.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Two Paths", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 25.

"No longer can the perfect Buddhas, who don the *Dharmakaya* glory, help man's salvation. Alas! shall SELVES be sacrificed to Self; mankind, unto the weal of Units?"

Meditation thought: Blavatsky's sharp question challenges exclusive fruition. Contemplate its ethical force without turning it into a judgment upon every different Buddhist use of the vestures.

5. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, pp. 163–164.

"A vow is sacred; it must germinate in silence. It invokes sacred speech, but it must ripen through suffering. Where the vow involves a recognition of the ubiquity of human suffering and where one chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it."

Meditation thought: A vow remains educative when suffering brings renewed attention to its purpose. Quiet self-correction is more dependable than the excitement of a grand declaration.

6. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan Yin", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 164.

"There is a latent Kwan Yin in every human being. It is the voice of conscience at the commonest level. It is the *Chitkala* of the developed disciple. At the highest level it is *Nada*, the Voice of the Silence, the Soundless Sound, that which is comprehended in initiation, and ceaselessly reverberates in the *Anahata*, the deathless centre of the human body, transformed into a divine temple."

Meditation thought: The passage distinguishes several levels of compassionate voice. Begin with fidelity to conscience while respecting the greater conditions of discipleship and initiation.

7. R.N. Iyer, "The Message of Buddha", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 227.

"Meditation upon voidness and fullness can increase the seeker's insight into the dialectic of transcendental wisdom in the *prajnaparamita* texts as well as reveal the indissoluble connection between wisdom (*prajna*) and unconditional compassion (*mahakaruna*)."

Meditation thought: Wisdom and compassion belong together. Understanding becomes more exact when it remains attentive to suffering, and help becomes wiser when it welcomes discrimination.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Enlightenment", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 236.

"Ultimately, there can be no true comprehension of enlightenment or of the path outside of enlightenment itself. Mortality cannot judge of immortality; *avidya* cannot conceive of *vidya*. The insubstantial self of mayavic matter cannot encompass the boundlessness of the Real. The shadow cannot comprehend the light that casts it."

Meditation thought: The limited cannot measure the unlimited by its own boundaries. Humility keeps an exalted idea available for study without converting it into a personal claim.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Transcendence and Transformation", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 352.

"It is impossible for the mind to reach the plane of *Mahat* or the universal mind until it is willing to forego its addiction to finitizing tendencies."

Meditation thought: The higher possibility asks for a wider standpoint. Study can prepare that widening when it loosens a habit of reducing every truth to personal concerns.

10. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Seven Portals", explanatory note, *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 54.

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

Meditation thought: The additional perfections distinguish this vesture in Blavatsky's account. Read its release from earthly concerns beside the knowledge retained for compassionate service.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, "The Seven Portals", explanatory note, *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 54.

"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 to mankind, there is none known."

Meditation thought: The helping Adept retains knowledge while renouncing exclusive consummation. The ethical emphasis falls upon making the fruits of understanding available to humanity.

12. R.N. Iyer, "Creative Emanation", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 184.

"Masters of Wisdom and Compassion voluntarily assume responsibility without appropriating the free will of any person or atoning for anyone's sins. Taking responsibility for the whole world, they can shoulder it, and in assuming that uncircumscribed responsibility, they define themselves."

Meditation thought: Responsibility does not require taking possession of another person's freedom. Help becomes more trustworthy when it strengthens that person's capacity for choice and learning.