

Dhy~ni and Other Buddhas

One needs to distinguish the real Buddha from all the symbolic representations. *But what really is a Buddha?* Words alone will never answer this question. Even the most highly-evolved bodhisattvas cannot imagine the answer. The ineffability of buddhahood is one of its foremost qualities.

As far as the relative world of words and images go, we encounter buddhas on three levels:

- C *dharmakaya* Buddhas as formal icons of a formless primordial reality,
- C *sambhogakaya* Buddhas as mind's natural symbols: the spontaneous expression of enlightenment's myriad qualities and
- C *nirmanakaya* Buddhas as specific beings who have attained these qualities.

The Primordial Buddha (*Ati-buddha*)

This is truly Buddha: the limitless dharmakaya which knows itself perfectly and which can never be 'known' directly by anything less than itself. Being the quintessential character of all things, it is omnipresent and omniscient. The iconographical representation of the ati-buddha is a naked buddha, often blue: the colour of the space element. To appreciate fully the significance of this element, one must delve into Maitreya's teachings on buddha nature, in which he shows how space is radically different from the other elements yet, at one and the same time, pervades them all. Likewise the ati-buddha is like no thing in the world yet pervades everything. The ati-buddha is referred to as Total Goodness (*samantabhadra*) in the Nyingma tradition, as Vajra Holder (*vajradhara*) in the Kagyu tradition and as Vairocana, Vajrasattva and many other names in the vast panoply of tantra. The ati-buddha is the ultimate fusion of three things: perfect wisdom, universal compassion and real power to help beings anywhere and at any time, whenever their mind opens. The universal presence of the ati-buddha is known as *dharmakaya* - the expanse of truth, or alternatively as *svabhavikakaya* - the expanse of essential wisdom.

A million facets of expression - *sambhogakaya*

Just as white light can give rise to any of a million tonalities of colour when it strikes a certain surface or just as a single wind can make many notes as it blows across different containers, so does the primordial wisdom of the *ati-buddha* express itself in an almost limitless number of ways, depending upon the mind which experiences it and the particular qualities of enlightenment which that mind is experiencing in the instant. Although itself formless, without personality and non-specific, it is perceived by the relative mind in the symbolic form of a buddha in a specific place and having a specific character.

The highly-purified minds of Buddhist saints (*mahabodhisattvas*) are said to abide uninterruptedly in a sublime experience of this primordial wisdom. They learn and progress through a visionary, initiatory journey into realm after realm of purity, each centred around specific buddhas. Their uplifted senses of sight, sound and smell translate into tangible experiences the wonder of what is intrinsically beyond the senses and which would otherwise remain beyond their grasp.

The healing power of the buddhas, for instance, manifests to them as the Healing Buddha Bhaisajya, in a palace reflecting the structure of medical science, amid a pure country of light filled with medicinal herbs, shrubs and trees. He is accompanied by the celestial beings associated with healing and medicine. Everything in that particular domain of experience is an archetypal manifestation of the healing power and medical knowledge deep within the mind. Bodhisattvas have many thousands of such experiences. This highly-symbolic yet spontaneous play of the mind is very prodigious. Buddha is not naked for them but luxuriantly clothed in symbolic attributes. This is reflected in the jewels, ornaments and fineries depicted in the iconography of the *sambhogakaya* - the expanse of perfect expression.

In vajrayana Buddhism, these Buddhas and their pure lands also manifest enlightenment's freedom from impurity. This is particularly represented by the five Buddha 'families' — the counterpart of the five main groups of mental poisons. Because these Buddhas are experienced in profound meditative absorption (Skt: *dhyana*) as the archetypal manifestation of purity, they have been called, in recent years, *dhyani buddhas*. They can appear alone or in sexual embrace with their consorts, to emphasise

that each is the perfect fusion of wisdom and skilful compassion. To each is allocated a direction, with respect to the human body, on the assumption that whichever direction one faces is the cosmic East, even if it is not the geographical East. Often known as 'the crowning five buddhas', they play a significant role in the first stage of tantric initiation, known as the 'vase' stage which consecrates the disciple's body and permits visualisation, as well as certain yogic exercises. In practice they are visualised at the summit and four sides of the head but in ritual this is represented by a crown in which they are all gathered, in their respective order, towards the front of the head.

Dhyani Buddhas - Sambhogakaya Visions

Each dhyani buddha heads a family of bodhisattvas and protectors and presides over one fifth of the phenomena of life. With each are associated certain things of the neurotic worldly mind and what these things become at enlightenment. These include colours, elements, landscapes, times and seasons, emotional tones and so forth. However, there is not a total consistency from one tantra to another and the attributes of colour or direction can vary.

Aksobya Buddha is associated with the water element, the eastern quarter, daybreak and winter. He heads the vajra family and holds a vajra in his left hand, his right hand touching the earth. Like calm water, he embodies the mirror-like primordial wisdom which is the counterpart of anger — troubled, ruffled water. Vajra is sharp and cutting, like a frosty winter morning, but exceptional clear, thorough and precise. A neurotic obsession with analytical precision lends itself to anger whereas the calm mind, like a mirror, reflects all with ultimate accuracy and no reaction. The colour associated with this direction is variously white or pale blue.

Ratnasambhava heads the jewel (*ratna*) family and is associated with the earth element and the southern quarter. He holds a jewel in the left hand and has the right turned outwards, in the bestowing mudra. Embodying the primordial wisdom of sameness, he is the enlightened counterpart of desire, which sees some things as better than others. In lunar calendars, the earth element occurs four times a year, in between the other elemental seasons. It is the still point, the neutral changeover between spring (wind) and summer (fire), between summer and autumn (metal) and so forth. Through the south, he is also associated with the afternoon, autumn and the golden rays of the sun, the generosity of nature's harvests and life in general.

Amitabha heads the lotus (*padma*) family and presides over the western quarter and the fire element. Both hands are in the meditation mudra, holding a lotus. He embodies the primordial wisdom of discernment, which knows every single relative phenomenon for what it is. This is the enlightened

counterpart of possessiveness, in which one is blinded to truth by passionate desires. Fire consumes and destroys but it can also purify and give warmth. This family is associated with early spring and morning, through the fire element, and with sunset, through the western association.

Amogasiddhi, who presides over the activity (*karma*) is associated with the north, the wind element and the colour green. Holding the double vajra in the left hand, he bestows fearlessness with the right. He embodies the primordial wisdom of all-accomplishing, altruistic activity, which is the enlightened counterpart of jealousy and envy, rooted in actions centred around a preoccupation with self-image. This family is associated with midday and with late spring and summer when the dynamism of the wind element cause new things come into being everywhere.

Vairocana is located at the centre of the dhyani buddha mandala. Associated with the colour blue (sometimes white), he heads the *buddha* family and holds the wheel of dharma in his hands, which rest in meditation posture. He embodies the dharmadhatu primordial wisdom, which is the ground state underlying the other four wisdoms. This is the counterpart of ignorance, the dullness and not-knowing which underlies all the neurosis and confusion of samsara. Dharmadhatu recognises the void nature of all things and is thus the natural wisdom which emerges when ignorance that projects self-entity — as ego, pride and fixed notions of reality — is dissipated. Vairocana is timelessness.

Nirmanakaya Buddhas

In golden time, which represent the fruition of much good collective karma, other beings, lacking the pure vision of the bodhisattvas, still manage to experience the buddhas' nirmanakaya. Of its various forms, the *supreme nirmanakaya* are the most spectacular, as it is they who visit a world and introduce the timeless teachings of universal truth. The first one supposed to have come to our own world was Buddha Krakucchanda, followed by Buddhas Kanakamuni, Kasyapa and then our Buddha, Sakyamuni, who was thus the fourth to grace this planet. Tens of thousands of years from now will come the fifth, Buddha Maitreya, followed by the Lion Buddha and so on and so forth until one thousand and two buddhas will have taught here. Then the planetary support of life will be

consumed by fire. The details of these buddhas, their teachings and disciples are listed in the *Good Age Sutra* and the waxing and waning of the ages is described in the *Wheel of Time* tantra.