

Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

Seeing the Buddha

Buddhism in Every Step A13
（英文版）

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Seeing the Buddha

It has been over two thousand years since the Buddha entered final *nirvana*. We now live in what is called the Age of Declining Dharma, in which we can no longer see the Buddha in person. When I think about these things, I am reminded of a Buddhist verse which aptly describes my feelings:

When the Buddha was in the world,
I was lost.
After the Buddha passed into nirvana
was I then born.
I repent for all my many karmic obstacles
That have prevented me from seeing the
Tathagata's golden body.

There are actually many ways one can see the Buddha. We see the Buddha through sacred images like statues and drawings, we can read the sutras and learn what the Buddha looked like in person,

and through our practice we can come to know the Dharmakaya, the true body of the Buddha. By seeing the Buddha in these ways, we can gain a better understanding of our great teacher.

I. Buddha Images

Today, when we wish to envision the physical appearance of the Buddha, we rely on statues and paintings of him. Throughout the years, people have portrayed the Buddha in various fashions. Some carve images of the Buddha in wood or stone, others sculpt in metal, and still others prefer the use of paper and paint. Not only are different materials used, there are also many varied poses. Sometimes, the Buddha is depicted in a sitting position, while at other times he is standing or reclining. Regardless of the material used or the posture chosen, we can generally feel his compassion, magnanimity, and greatness.

Why are some statues of the Buddha sitting, while others are standing? Each of these postures has a profound meaning and symbolizes the Buddha's spirit and noble characteristics. In some cases, the Buddha is portrayed as seated in the lotus position with his hands poised above his lap, as if he is deep in meditative concentration. This symbolizes his enlightenment. The Buddha became enlightened only by practicing over a prolonged period of

contemplation, deep meditation, and knowing himself. At other times, we see the Buddha portrayed in a seated position with his left hand in his lap, with the palm of his raised right hand facing outward, teaching the Dharma. This symbolizes the Buddha cultivating enlightenment not only for himself, but also for the sake of others. After reaching enlightenment, the Buddha began to teach the truth to all sentient beings, helping us to get rid of our delusions.

In some statues of the Buddha, he is standing with one hand down, receiving and guiding us sentient beings. When we feel lost in the sea of suffering, it is natural to feel overjoyed to see the Buddha extending a helping hand to us. In other statues, the Buddha is walking, as if hurrying somewhere to teach the Dharma. The fully enlightened Buddha is most affectionate in his efforts to help all of us; he is always there to be of service to us.

Some statues and paintings show the Buddha lying down, peacefully entering nirvana. This posture symbolizes the fulfillment of both merit and wisdom and the end of the cycle of birth and death. The reclining posture also symbolizes a transition from active engagement to that of tranquility. When the Buddha was alive, he was always active, traveling everywhere to teach the Dharma. While all activity must come to an end, tranquility can endure. Upon entering final nirvana, the Buddha became one with

the world and the flow of time. Thus, we say nirvana is a transition from activity to tranquility. The images of the Buddha entering final nirvana show us that he is always in our hearts, ever present like the earth and enduring like the sun and moon.

The First Wooden Statue of the Buddha

When was the first wooden statue of the Buddha carved? *The Numerical Discourses* contain a detailed account, which is confirmed by *The Record of the Western Regions*: One year, during the summer retreat period, no one could find the Buddha. When the disciples realized that the Buddha was missing, they started to look for him, but no one knew his whereabouts. They then went to ask Ananda if he knew where the Buddha was, but Ananda did not know. Ananda suggested that they should solicit the help of Aniruddha, who was foremost in heavenly vision. Using his gift of supernatural vision, Aniruddha found out that the Buddha had gone to Trayastrimsat Heaven to teach the Dharma to his deceased mother, Queen Maya.

Why did the Buddha leave for Trayastrimsat Heaven without letting anyone know? There were three reasons. First, the Buddha had always wanted to teach the Dharma to his deceased mother to thank her for bringing him into this world. Second, as the

Buddha was always there to instruct them, some of his disciples had grown complacent and lax with his teachings. Third, there had been some quarrels within the monastic community, and the Buddha wanted those involved to have time to reflect on their behavior.

Among those who missed the Buddha the most was King Udayana of Kausambi. The king revered the Buddha, and he became so distraught by the Buddha's absence that he fell ill. The royal household put their heads together to find a way to make the king feel better. They commissioned the best sculptor in the land to sculpt a statue of the Buddha. They hoped that, in the absence of the Buddha, they could pay their respects to the statue instead. The king was very pleased with the idea, and he immediately asked Maudgalyayana, who was foremost among the Buddha's disciples in supernatural power, to help them. Using his supernatural power, Maudgalyayana transported a sculptor to Trayastrimsat Heaven so that he might study the magnificent appearance of the Buddha. After three visits to the heaven, the sculptor finally carved a five-foot tall likeness of the Buddha out of sandalwood. When the king saw the finished statue, he was happy beyond words and recovered from his illness.

After three months, the Buddha returned to our world. On his return, the statue came to life and went

to welcome the Buddha. The Buddha smiled and said, "You must be tired from teaching. It will be up to you to remind future generations of sentient beings of the truth."

As this story states, the first wooden image of the Buddha was carved while he was still alive, before he entered final nirvana. The way the statue came to life to welcome the Buddha symbolizes that the Buddha is always present among us. When we see statues of the Buddha, we are in essence seeing the Buddha.

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The First Metal Statue of the Buddha

What about the first metal statue of the Buddha? *The Numerical Discourses* contain the story of its creation, which is also contained in the *Mulasarvastivada Nidana:* When King Prasenajit of Kosala learned that King Udayana had carved the Buddha's likeness out of sandalwood, he too contemplated creating an image of the Buddha. King Prasenajit wanted to show his reverence for the Buddha. In addition, the king had a somewhat competitive spirit and wished to outdo King Udayana. King Prasenajit thus commissioned a statue of the Buddha made of pure gold. The statue was again five feet tall and marked the beginning of the creation of metal images of the Buddha.

Around the same time, the elder Anathapindaka also expressed his desire to cast a statue of the Buddha. One day after the Buddha finished teaching the Dharma in Jeta Grove Monastery, Anathapindaka went up to him and paid his respects. He prostrated in front of the Buddha and said, "Lord Buddha, when the Buddha is with us, everyone is so respectful and everything feels right and magnificent. Unfortunately, when the Buddha has to travel to other places to spread the Dharma, we feel the absence of the Buddha, and order is not at the same level as when the Buddha is here with us. I ask permission to cast the Buddha's likeness so that when the Buddha is away, we have a statue to remind us of the Buddha and for us to pay our respects. In this way, we will always feel close to the Buddha."

The Buddha was very pleased. He told Anathapindaka, "Since you are doing this to remind others of the Dharma, I give you my permission."

Anathapindaka asked further, "We'd like to honor the Buddha, and I hope the Buddha will allow us to adorn the statue."

The Buddha replied, "You may do as you see fit."

From these parts of the sutra, we see that even while the Buddha was alive, many kings and elders wanted to sculpt statues of him, so they could pay their respects to him. A golden statue of the Buddha is like a bright light; it lights up our hearts.

The First Painting of the Buddha

When was the first painting of the Buddha made? There is no definitive answer to this question. According to the *Agamas*, one of the earliest paintings of the Buddha was completed when the Buddha was about to enter final nirvana. Mahakasyapa was concerned that King Ajatasatru of Magadha would be devastated by the news of the Buddha's passing away. So after discussing the issue with King Ajatasatru's imperial court, they decided to commission a painting of the Buddha to help the king overcome his grief.

Paintings of the Buddha were brought to China during the Han dynasty roughly a thousand years after the Buddha entered final nirvana. During that time, many monks from China had traveled to India to study Buddhism. There they saw the sandalwood statue of the Buddha, which they wished to bring back to China so that the Chinese people could see the appearance of the Buddha. However, the Indian kings refused to part with their precious statues. Because of this, they commissioned paintings of the statue so that the monks from China could bring them home with them. When the Han emperor saw the paintings, he was delighted and ordered that a painting of the Buddha be displayed on the main gate of the city of Luoyang, allowing his people to pay their respects to the Buddha.

Today, Buddhists will often display paintings of the Buddha in their homes because they can be more convenient than statues or other images. As long as we are sincere, it does not matter how large or small the painting is; it will shine on all those who pay their respects.

Paying Respect to Images of the Buddha

Regardless of whether a Buddha statue is made of stone, wood, or metal, regardless of whether a painting is done on cloth or paper, we can still pay our respects to these sacred images of the Buddha. Some of you may ask: Why should we venerate images of the Buddha?

First, it is important to recognize that we all pay respect to images. For example, citizens will pay respect to their country's flag, even though the flag is just a piece of cloth. Why do we pay our respects to a piece of cloth? Even though a flag may be a piece of cloth, it represents much more than that. It is a symbol of our country and the pride we have for our country. Christians also pay their respects to the crucifix. However, a crucifix is just a thing of wood or metal. Does it mean that Christians should not prostrate themselves before the crucifix? There is absolutely nothing wrong with paying respect to certain symbols or images, so long as we understand the goodness that these symbols or images represent.

A piece of cloth can be tailored into a hat to be worn on the head. The same piece of cloth can also be made into a pair of slippers to wear on the feet. A piece of cloth by itself is just a piece of cloth, but we look at it differently once it takes the shape of its final product. We would keep a piece of paper with our parents' picture on it in a safe place. A doodle on the same piece of paper could be tossed away at will with no remorse. In the same way, a piece of metal that has been cast into a Buddha statue should be kept in a proper, clean place. The same piece of metal, if it had been cast into a toy figure, could be kicked or thrown around without any hesitation. A Buddha statue may be made of wood, stone, or metal, but in our hearts the statue stands for the fully enlightened Buddha. When we pay our respects to sacred images of the Buddha, we are not paying respect to the wood, stone, or metal that these images are made out of; we are paying our respects to the Buddha.

It is important that we know why we do certain things. When we pay respect to a Buddha statue, we should focus our minds on the Buddha and extinguish the fires of our delusions. We should be respectful and sincere. If we pay our respects to Buddha statues correctly, then any image of the Buddha can strengthen our faith and touch our hearts. One Chinese saying, "When there is utmost sincerity and concentration, even stones or gold can open up," suggests that if

we are reverent while paying respect to statues of the Buddha, we will feel the presence of the Buddha.

In fact, Buddhism is a religion that values one's intentions over established traditions and teaches us not to rely on images, sacred or not. A particular *gongan* from the Chan School illustrates this point well: Once, Chan Master Danxia Tianran took up residence at a monastery. The winter that year was unusually harsh. To stay warm, Danxia went up to the altar, took a wooden Buddha statue, and dragged it to the fire. Another monk saw what he was doing and stopped him in his tracks. He yelled at Danxia, "How dare you use a Buddha statue to keep warm?"

Danxia was not at all offended. He replied, "I am not using it as a piece of firewood. I just want to see if I can get some Buddha relics."

The monk responded, "Nonsense! How can you get Buddha relics from a piece of wood?"

"If this is a piece of wood, then why don't we use it as firewood?" Having said this, Danxia tossed the wooden statue onto the fire.

Danxia was a true student of the Buddha, for he understood the essence of the teachings. He knew that the mind, the Buddhas, and sentient beings are one and the same. When we are not yet enlightened, we should respect sacred images. When we are enlightened, we will know that the Buddha is not to be found in sacred images but is found within ourselves.

Before Emperor Xuan of the Tang dynasty became emperor, he was a novice monk in a temple. Once, he saw the Chan Master Huangbo Xiyun in the shrine hall paying his respects to the Buddha. As he stood behind the Chan master, he recalled one of the Chan master's sayings and unconsciously repeated the words, "Don't get attached to the Buddha, don't get attached to the Dharma, and don't get attached to the Sangha. What's the point of paying respect to the Buddha?"

When the Chan master heard this, he turned around, slapped the student in the face, and declared, "Don't get attached to the Buddha, don't get attached to the Dharma, and don't get attached to the Sangha. But, in your case, you should."

Those who do not understand the meaning behind paying respect to sacred images often find it ludicrous that we do so. They do not realize that when one bows before the Buddha, that person's mind is connecting with the mind of the Buddha.

II. What the Buddha Looked Like in Person

The Golden Body of the Buddha

The true body of the Buddha is that of the Dharmakaya; it is the true essence of the Buddha,

without shape or form. About two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha was born into this world. He had a most majestic appearance, exhibiting the thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable characteristics. *The Contemplating the Mind Sutra* says, "The Buddha looks golden, radiant, pleasing, and majestic. The presence of the Buddha elicits joy and happiness in all sentient beings."

Some of the Buddha's disciples were so struck by his dignified appearance that they decided to become monastics even before they heard his teachings. Mahakasyapa, a wealthy Brahmin, was one such example. One day, Mahakasyapa saw the Buddha resting under a tree. He was drawn to the Buddha, saluted him with joined palms, and decided right then that he wanted to join the monastic community. When the elder Anathapindaka met the Buddha while traveling south, he was moved by the Buddha's splendid looks. He prostrated in front of the Buddha and invited him to his hometown in the north to teach the Dharma to the people there.

The stately appearance of the Buddha also converted many malicious individuals. Devadatta, the Buddha's disciple and cousin, betrayed the Buddha and hired six bandits to assassinate him. When the six bandits saw the Buddha, they were moved by his majestic appearance. They threw down their weapons and asked the Buddha for forgiveness. On another

occasion, the heartless murderer Angulimalya met the Buddha on the road. The ruthless Angulimalya trembled in fear in the presence of the Buddha and begged him for permission to join the monastic community.

Animals too were also touched by the presence of the Buddha. Monkeys would gather wild fruits to make him offerings. A drunken elephant, let loose by Devadatta to kill the Buddha, knelt down in front of him and wept. The Buddha radiated warmth like the sun and moon. His majestic appearance alone could cause the cruel to turn compassionate, the violent to become peaceful. Over the forty-nine years or so the Buddha taught the Dharma, his majestic aspect awed innumerable sentient beings.

The Resplendent Appearance of the Buddha

The sutras describe the golden complexion of the Buddha, with its thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable characteristics. Marks are more apparent, while characteristics are more subtle and harder to detect. The two are closely related, and the latter stem from the existence of the former. The magnificent appearance of the Buddha did not form from mere chance. It was the result of spiritual cultivation and doing good deeds over a period of ninety *kalpas*. Each of the thirty-two marks and

eighty characteristics represents a virtue that the Buddha practiced. Take the example of the broad, long tongue of the Buddha. He achieved this by not stating falsehoods. These marks and characteristics, which possess symbolic meanings, are said to be attributes that are apparent to bodhisattvas and other cultivated beings.

What are the thirty-two marks of excellence? They are:

1. Feet that are planted flat on the ground without hollow spots.
2. Dharma wheels on the soles of the feet with a thousand spokes.
3. Long, slender fingers that are as white as snow.
4. Flexible limbs that are neither coarse nor stiff.
5. Webbed fingers and toes that have connecting tissue.
6. Perfectly round heels without hollow or protruding spots.
7. Arched insteps that are perfectly formed front and back.
8. Thighs that are fine and round like those of a royal stag.
9. Arms reaching below the knee as stately as a mountain.

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10. Retracted male organ that is concealed within the body.
11. The height of the body and the span of the arms being equal.
12. Every body hair being dark in color.
13. Body hair that is fine and curls up.
14. A golden complexion.
15. Light that radiates from the body in all directions for ten feet.
16. Fine lustrous skin that is as soft as oil.
17. Feet, palms, shoulders, and crown that are perfectly formed and proportioned.
18. Both armpits are full without hollow spots.
19. Perfectly balanced body of solemn appearance.
20. Firm and erect stature without bends or humps.
21. Full and proportioned shoulders that are extraordinarily well-developed.
22. Mouth containing forty teeth.
23. Teeth that are white, close together, clean, and firm.
24. Teeth that are perfectly aligned with nothing out of place.
25. Full cheeks like those of a lion.
26. Saliva that can make food taste delicious.
27. Broad and long tongue that is soft and thin.
28. Voice that can be heard from afar.

29. Eyes that are dark blue and as clear as the great ocean.
30. Eyelashes that are uniquely special and extraordinary.
31. White tuft of hair between the eyes that emits light.
32. Fleshy protuberance on the head.

The eighty notable characteristics are:

1. Top of his head not visible to others.
2. A prominent nose with well-concealed nostrils.
3. Eyebrows shaped like a new moon.
4. Large, round ears that are long and thick.
5. A strong body.
6. Closely-fit bones.
7. When he turns, his whole body turns, just like a majestic elephant.
8. Leaves imprints as he walks.
9. Red fingernails.
10. Full, rounded knees.
11. A clean body.
12. Soft, smooth skin.
13. Straight, erect posture.
14. Round, slender fingers.
15. Fine fingerprints.
16. No visible veins.

17. Well-concealed heel bones.
18. A supple, smooth body.
19. A round, full body.
20. A straight, steady, focused gait.
21. A dignified appearance.
22. Peaceful and calm deportment.
23. A stable posture when standing.
24. A majestic presence.
25. A pleasing appearance.
26. A perfectly sized face.
27. Unperturbed demeanor.
28. A beautiful, complete face.
29. Red lips.
30. A voice that carries.
31. A deep, round navel.
32. Hair that curls to the right.
33. Long arms that reach below the knees.
34. Flexible arms and legs.
35. Clear, straight palm-lines.
36. Fine, long palm-lines.
37. Unbroken palm-lines.
38. Brings joy to those who see him.
39. A perfect, broad face.
40. A face full like the moon.
41. Peaceful, joyful speech.
42. Fragrant pores.
43. Fragrant breath.
44. Appearance awe-inspiring like that of a lion.

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45. Gait steady like that of an elephant.
46. Steps airy like that of a goose king.
47. A well-formed forehead.
48. A clearly audible voice.
49. White teeth.
50. A bright red tongue.
51. A long, thin tongue.
52. Thick body hair.
53. Soft, clean body hair.
54. Big, wide eyes.
55. A clean, unobstructed airway connecting the seven openings of the face.
56. Lotus-colored hands and feet.
57. A well-concealed navel.
58. An abdomen that does not protrude.
59. A well-sized abdomen.
60. Steady, stable body.
61. A sturdy, stable body.
62. A large frame.
63. Soft, clean hands and feet.
64. A ten-foot halo.
65. A glowing halo.
66. Treats all sentient beings equally.
67. A majestic appearance.
68. Does not slight any sentient being.
69. An even voice.
70. Able to vary his teaching methods.
71. Teaches according to the circumstances.

72. Though speaking with one voice, sentient beings receive many teachings according to their needs.
73. Adapts his teachings according to the spiritual maturity of the listener.
74. Can be seen with endlessly different appearances.
75. An appearance one wishes to see again.
76. Long, healthy hair.
77. Long, neat hair.
78. Neatly curled hair.
79. Dark-colored hair.
80. A virtuous appearance.

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Many different sutras contain descriptions of the thirty-two marks and eighty characteristics, each with slight variations. However, we all agree that the Buddha did not appear different from an ordinary person. In fact, across many texts each time the Buddha's appearance is described a little differently.

In one story a skeptic hears that the Buddha is said to stand sixteen feet tall. Not believing such a massive number, he decides to measure the Buddha. He prepares a measuring pole that is sixteen feet in length and holds it up to the Buddha, only to find that the Buddha is taller than the pole. Flustered, the skeptic carefully measures another pole to be sixteen

feet, and once again the Buddha exceeds it. Each time, again and again, the skeptic is unable to measure the Buddha.

In the story *Journey to the West*, the mischievous monkey king Sun Wukong is able to travel 108,000 miles in a single somersault. At one point in the tale, Sun Wukong has caused so much trouble that the court of the Jade Emperor asks the Buddha to help. The Buddha holds the monkey king in his palm and challenges him to escape. Sun Wukong accepts the challenge but, even with ten somersaults, is unable to exit the Buddha's palm.

Another distinguished feature of the Buddha was his broad, long tongue, and when the Buddha taught the Dharma, his voice could be heard even from a great distance. In *The Great Treasures Collection Sutra*, Maudgalyayana wanted to find out for himself how far the voice of the Buddha could carry. He used his supernatural power and traveled to a far away Buddha Land in the east. Even there, he could still hear the Buddha teaching the Dharma. This is not a difficult concept to believe at all. Nowadays, people in Taiwan can receive radio broadcasts from places as far away as Europe or North America. But the technological innovation of radio broadcasting cannot compare to the skillful means of the Buddha. When the Buddha taught the Dharma, his voice could reach across the great three

thousandfold world system. Thus, when we say that the Buddha has thirty-two marks and eighty notable characteristics, we are only describing the splendor that can be physically observed. Due to the limitations of our faculties, we cannot even come close to appreciating the true splendor of the Buddha.

An Enlightened Being Is Still Subject to Impermanence

The Buddha lived in this world for a total of eighty years. In this world of impermanence, the Buddha's life was also impermanent. While the statues that we see of the Buddha mostly represent one specific stage of his life, there are actually eight stages in the Buddha's life. They are:

1. Descent from Tusita Heaven

Many thousands of lifetimes ago, Sakyamuni was an ascetic named Sumedha. During that lifetime, Sumedha encountered a previous Buddha, Dipamkara Buddha, who prophesized that Sumedha would become the Buddha of our world and would be named Sakyamuni. The Buddha-to-be then went on to live in Tusita Heaven for a total of four thousand years. There, he waited for the right conditions to be born into this world.

2. Entry into the womb

In the form of a white elephant, the Buddha entered into the womb of Queen Maya through her right side.

3. Birth

On the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the Buddha was born in Lumbini Grove. As soon as he left the womb, he took seven steps and proclaimed, "Of all beings above the heavens and below, I am the worthiest." The prince was named Siddhartha Gautama.

4. Leaving home

At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha wanted to find liberation from human suffering. Problems such as the discrimination of the caste system, the impermanence of all things, and the fierce competition for survival had always been on his mind. One night, he left the palace life to seek the truth.

5. Subduing mara

After he left the palace, the prince spent years in cultivation. During this time, he faced mara, a malevolent deity and personification of death and desire. The prince subdued mara internally by vanquishing the greed and anger within his own mind, while the prince subdued mara externally in the form of sense pleasures and charming illusions. The prince was

able to conquer Mara's armies through great heroism, great wisdom, and great fearlessness.

6. Enlightenment

On the eighth day of the twelfth month, while sitting beneath the bodhi tree and gazing at the starry sky, Siddhartha attained enlightenment.

7. Turning the Dharma wheel

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next forty-nine years or so teaching the Dharma across the human realm so that the wheel of the Dharma would never stop turning and the teaching would not extinguish.

8. Final nirvana

On the fifteenth day of the second month in his eightieth year, the Buddha lay down between two sala trees and entered final nirvana. From a life of active engagement, the Buddha returned to a state of tranquility. His presence became totally integrated with the intricate workings of the universe.

Though the Buddha was fully enlightened, he was very much a person. Like you and me, he lived through different stages of his life. These eight stages fully describe the life of the Buddha.

An Enlightened Being Still Encounters Hardship

When we look at the peaceful appearance of the Buddha in statues and drawings, we may leap to the conclusion that the Buddha must not have suffered in his life. This is not the case at all. In reality, the Buddha was not only majestic in his appearance but also in the way he carried himself, especially in the face of adversity. The Buddha practiced what he preached. If he had not undergone these experiences himself, his teachings about impermanence and suffering would have held little credibility. Like every one else, the Buddha also aged, became sick, and had to deal with difficult times. After all, the noble appearance of the Buddha is not his true form but a manifestation intended to function in the world. Living in the world, it was just natural that the Buddha had to cope with both the good and bad aspects of life.

During his travels, the Buddha was hurt twice. Once, while traveling in the Khadira Mountains, he caught a splinter from the poisonous acacia tree. On another occasion, Devadatta pushed a huge boulder off Vulture Peak onto the Buddha. The Buddha's right foot was badly injured.

The Buddha also fell ill. One time, the Buddha was cured by the famous physician, Jivaka. On another occasion, the Buddha suffered from back pain. He asked Ananda to go into the village to get a cup

of cow's milk and asked Mahakasyapa to chant the seven factors of enlightenment for him. The pain subsided.

The Buddha also faced hunger. One year, there was a famine, and the Buddha subsisted on the remains of horse feed for three months. In another instance, the Buddha went out for his alms round only to come back home empty-handed. He went hungry that day.

In addition to physical hardships, the Buddha also had to deal with the hostility of others. A Brahmin woman named Cincamanavika slandered the Buddha to his face. King Suprabuddha of the Koliya clan openly criticized the Buddha. But the Buddha was not at all bothered by others' ill feelings toward him. He was a great teacher, demonstrating by example how to behave in the face of adversity.

Some people asked why such misfortunes would befall people who practiced for as long as the Buddha. King Prasenajit of Kosala was one such person. He once asked the Buddha, "Lord Buddha is most majestic; we can all see that with our eyes. Why is it that misfortune still befalls the Buddha?"

The Buddha replied, "This physical body that you see in front of you is not the true body of the Buddha. All Buddhas have transcended life and death. It is for the purpose of teaching sentient beings that these misfortunes befall me—be it a broken foot, an aching

back, the taking of medicine, or even entering final nirvana. I want all beings to know that the effects of karma can never be destroyed. This way, they will think carefully before they act. They will learn to practice goodness, refrain from any wrongdoing, and in this way, discover their own eternal Dharmakaya. We all should wake up from the delusions of the phenomenal body and avoid clinging to the trappings of this Saha world."

King Prasenajit thanked the Buddha for this clarification. From this point on, he saw the Buddha in a totally new light and truly learned to appreciate the Buddha's compassion.

Although we do not have the fortune of being able to see the golden body of the Buddha, we should know that the Buddha lives on in our hearts. Whenever I think of the Buddha, I cannot but feel an enormous respect for him. My sentiments can be best summed up by the following adage:

In heaven above and below, there is no one
like the Buddha,
Nor can a comparison be made to anyone
in the worlds of the ten directions.
I have seen all that this world has to offer,
But there is absolutely no one like the
Buddha.

III. The Formless True Body of the Buddha

The True Body of the Buddha Is Formless

Today, we can see Buddha images everywhere. Even though the Buddha entered final nirvana over 2,500 years ago, he is still present in the world. But what then is the true body of the Buddha?

The true form of the Buddha is called his Dharmakaya. The Dharmakaya is the true essence of the Buddha and is formless. Even bodhisattvas of the ninth level of dwelling cannot see the Dharmakaya of a Buddha, so how can we, blinded by our delusions, fare any better? The Dharmakaya is without shape or form, without coming or going, without beginning or end. Given these characteristics, how can we see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha?

One sutra says, "Remove a bit of ignorance; experience a bit of Dharmakaya." From this we can see that the Dharmakaya is not something that can be seen physically, for the Dharmakaya is connected with one's realization. *The Flower Adornment Sutra* says, "Dharma nature is inherently empty and tranquil; it cannot be obtained nor seen. The emptiness of Dharma nature is the Buddha's state; it is not something that can be fathomed." The Dharmakaya is beyond language, words, and is unfathomable. In fact, it is said that "If one wishes to experience the Buddha's state, one's mind should be pure like space."

The Dharmakaya is the body of emptiness. It is said to be shapeless and formless, though it cannot be seen or described. It is shapeless, but every shape has it, and it is formless, though every form has it. The Dharmakaya is present everywhere, for it permeates the universe.

One time, Senior Monk Fu of Taiyuan was at Yangzhou giving Dharma talks on *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra.* When he was trying to explain the nature of the Dharmakaya, one Chan master in the audience could not help but snicker. After the talk, Senior Monk Fu went up to the Chan master and asked humbly, "Did I say anything wrong earlier when I was discussing the Dharmakaya?"

The Chan master replied, "If you really want to know about the Dharmakaya, I ask you to suspend the Dharma talks for three days and spend your time in contemplation. See the Dharmakaya for yourself. What is it?"

Upon the Chan master's suggestion, Head Monk Fu immediately postponed the Dharma talks for three days and sequestered himself so that he might contemplate the Dharmakaya without distraction. After three days, he came closer to seeing the Dharmakaya. He happily described the following to the Chan master:

The true Dharmakaya, just like space,
Courses through the past, present, and future, spanning in all directions.
Covering eight trigrams, including two opposites,[1]
In tune with conditions, manifesting through experience, it is everywhere.

From this incident, we learn that the Dharmakaya is not something that can be understood by seeking its appearance. It is not something that can be explained with words. The physical body of the Buddha is there for all of us to see, but the Dharmakaya of the Buddha cannot be seen or heard. The only way to get to know the Dharmakaya of the Buddha, the true body of the Buddha, is through our hearts and minds.

International Chan Buddhist Association

The Manifestations of the True Body of the Buddha

Though the Dharmakaya is formless, it cannot be said that we have never been exposed to its wondrous workings. *The Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* says, "The true body of the Dharmakaya is not the Buddha's majestic body or appearance. The

1. The "opposites" and the "trigrams" are references to Daoist cosmology.

Nirmanakaya is not apart from the Dharmakaya; the two are not the same and not different." While the splendid physical body of the Buddha is *not* the Dharmakaya of the Buddha, it is a manifestation of the Dharmakaya.

The Vajrapani Sutra says that the three aspects of the Buddha can be understood as the Dharmakaya, the body of true nature; the Sambhogakaya, the body of bliss; and the Nirmanakaya, the manifested body. The three are different but not distinct. They are still three aspects of the same body. The Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya are manifestations of the Dharmakaya. Without the Dharmakaya, there is no Sambhogakaya nor Nirmanakaya. Thus, when we look at images of the historic Buddha, we have somewhat of an idea of the nature of the Dharmakaya.

When the Buddha was alive in this world, he gave many Dharma talks. Among the listeners of these many talks, some saw the Buddha as golden, others silvery, and others as the colors of various gems. Some people looked at the Buddha and saw an ordinary man, others saw the Buddha as having a sixteen-foot-tall golden body, and others still saw the Buddha as being various heights. Different people even heard the voice of the Buddha differently. Some heard a soft, gentle voice. Others heard a powerful voice like the roar of a lion.

The teachings, too, vary according to the listener. Some heard teachings on generosity, others on morality, meditative concentration, developing wisdom, or liberation. How can we say these feats simply came from the Buddha's gold-hued body? Such abilities come from the Buddha's true body, which manifests the incredible power of the Dharmakaya.

The wondrous functions of the Dharmakaya are not just limited to our world. The sutras describe how the Buddha often appeared simultaneously in different worlds. The Buddha was known by many names, took on various forms, and used different methods to teach sentient beings. Are those not functions manifested by the Dharmakaya? Does the Dharmakaya not manifest its form and function everywhere, for how else could the Buddha teach the three thousandfold world system?

The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana Treatise says that the nature of the Dharmakaya is the light of great wisdom which permeates the world and is absolute truth. From this we can see that there is nothing in this world that is not one of the marvelous functions of the Dharmakaya.

From this explanation, we can see that everything in this world is nothing but a phenomenal manifestation of the Dharmakaya. Su Dongpo, a Song dynasty Chinese poet, expresses this idea in verse:

The sounds of the rippling creek are all words of the Buddha;
The mountain scene is none other than the body of the Dharma.

Another poem describes:

Luxuriant yellow flowers, nothing but prajna.
Lush green bamboos are all the Dharmakaya.

In the eyes of an enlightened being, there is nothing that is not the Buddha's Dharmakaya, and there is no place where the Buddha's Dharmakaya is not present. When the Buddha entered final nirvana, he became one with the Dharmakaya. The Dharmakaya permeates all phenomena, and all phenomena have the Dharmakaya. Even today, the Buddha lives within us, and we live within the Buddha's Dharmakaya.

Not only do we live within the Buddha's Dharmakaya, but as *The Suramgama Sutra* says, "The worlds of the ten directions are all in the heart of the Tathagata—they are like clouds in the clear sky." The heart of the Buddha is the true body of the Buddha, and all phenomena in the universe are simply forms and functions of the Buddha's true body.

The True Body of the Buddha Is Everywhere

The Dharmakaya of the Buddha is the true body of the Buddha. The Dharmakaya fills all the worlds of the ten directions. Its radiance shines on countless Buddha Lands. The Dharmakaya is the state of the Buddha. *The Flower Adornment Sutra* describes the vastness of the Dharmakaya as follows: "All the water in the oceans can be drunk up; all thoughts can be counted; space can be measured, and wind can be tied down; but the Buddha's state cannot be fully described." Even though it is everywhere, our delusion prevents us from seeing it. Only bodhisattvas who have attained the ten levels of dwelling can hear the ever-present sound of the Dharmakaya. The sutras also record the Buddha's instructions on how to recognize the Dharmakaya. In this regard, he once said, "To understand dependent origination is to see the Dharma. To see the Dharma is to see the Buddha." The Buddha's Dharmakaya is the true nature of all phenomena. If we understand the principle of dependent origination and understand the emptiness of all phenomena, then we will see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. *The Diamond Sutra* says, "Wherever this sutra can be found, there is also the Buddha." Wherever the Dharma is present, the Buddha is present. To have faith in the Dharma is to have faith in the Buddha. The Buddha is called the fully enlightened one because the Buddha is in

accord with the Dharma, lives the Dharma, and is one with the Dharma. If we do not have faith in the Dharma, are not respectful of the Dharma, or are ignorant of the Dharma, there is no way we can see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha.

When the causes and conditions that sustained the Nirmanakaya (the body of transformation) of the Buddha were exhausted, the Buddha prepared himself to enter final nirvana. All his disciples were stricken with grief. They were at a loss as to what to do. The Buddha said to them, "Please do not be sad. This body has grown old. It is like fixing a cart. No matter how well one maintains it, one day the cart will break down. Even if I were to live with you all for tens of thousands of years, we would still have to say goodbye one day. This is an immutable law of nature. After I enter final nirvana, my Dharmakaya will continue to be with you, guiding all of you. In nirvana, my Nirmanakaya becomes one with the Dharmakaya, which is as enduring as heaven and earth, as radiant as the sun and the moon. From now on, follow and practice my teachings, and you will see my Dharmakaya everywhere."

How true! If we follow and practice the Buddha's teachings, then we see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. The threefold training of morality, meditative concentration, and wisdom are the true body of the Buddha. The thirty-seven aspects of

enlightenment, the ten powers, the four kinds of fearlessness, and the eighteen exclusive attributes[2] are the true body of the Buddha. Even the teachings of the sangha are the true body of the Buddha.

The True Body of the Buddha Is Eternal

The Dharmakaya is everywhere, but it is up to us, especially those of us who have joined the monastic community, to help sentient beings see the Dharmakaya. It is the monastic community that bears the special responsibility to ensure that the teachings of the Buddha reach all corners of the world. Recognizing their efforts, the Buddha said, "To support the sangha is to honor me." The Dharmakaya is ever present, and it is up to us, the sangha, to ensure that the Buddha's teachings will live forever in the minds of the people of this world.

The following exchange occurred between an emperor of the Tang dynasty and a Chan master. This exchange, recorded in poetic form, highlights the Dharmakaya as ever present. It encompasses many of the same points that have been previously discussed. The Tang emperor Shunzhi once asked the Chan master Foguang Ruman the whereabouts of the Buddha. The emperor asked:

2. The ten powers, four kinds of fearlessness, and eighteen exclusive attributes are all qualities which separate a Buddha from arhats or bodhisattvas.

From where did the Buddha come?
After nirvana, to where did the Buddha go?
Since we say the Buddha is ever abiding in this world,
Where is the Buddha now?

The Chan master replied:

From truth the Buddha came.
After nirvana, to truth the Buddha went.
The Dharmakaya fills all space,
Always abiding where it is free of mind.
Thoughts returning to no thought,
Abiding returning to non-abiding
[*The Buddha*] *arrives for the sake of sentient beings,*
Leaves for the sake of sentient beings,
Clear and pure like the ocean,
Profound and ever present.
The wise should contemplate [*thus*]
And have no further doubt.

The emperor, still doubting, asked further:

The Buddha, born in a palace,
Passed into final nirvana between two trees,

Taught in this world for forty-nine years,
Yet said that he did not speak of any Dharma.
Mountains, rivers, and vast oceans,
The sky, earth, sun, and moon,
There will be a time when they will cease.
Who is said to be without arising and ceasing?
I still have doubts.
Wise one, please explain.

The Chan master again replied:

The nature of Buddha is truth.
The deluded make discriminations.
The Dharmakaya is like space,
Neither arising nor ceasing.
When the right conditions are present,
The Buddha appears in this world;
When there is no right condition,
The Buddha enters nirvana.
Teaching sentient beings everywhere,
[*Buddha*] *is like the moon in water.*
Neither eternal nor annihilated,
Neither arising nor ceasing,
Though born, he is never born;
Though he has entered nirvana, he never passes into nirvana.

Seeing clearly the non-arising,
Naturally, there is no Dharma to speak of.

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