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Seeing the Buddha

Buddhism in Every Step 26

Written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Translated by Fo Guang Shan

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Translated from the Chinese by
Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

Edited and proofread by
Venerable Yi Chao and Louvenia Ortega

Cover design and book layout by
Mei-Chi Shih and Kevin Hsyeh

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Seeing the Buddha

It was over two thousand years ago that the Buddha entered parinirvana. Each time I think how unfortunate that we are not able to see the Buddha in person, I recall this verse which aptly describes my feelings:

*When the Buddha was alive,
sunken in depravity was I.
After the Buddha entered parinirvana, here am I.
Regretting my many karmic hindrances,
I do not see the Tathagata's golden body.*

Actually, there are many levels on which to see the Buddha. We can see the Buddha through statues and drawings, in person, or through his teachings. This booklet will discuss 1) Holy images of the Buddha, 2) What the Buddha looked like in person, and 3) The Dharmakaya of the Buddha. Hopefully the reader will gain a better understanding of the great teacher, the Buddha.

I. Holy Images of the Buddha

A. Different Kinds of Holy Images

When we learn about the Buddha, we can only imagine what he looked like when he was alive through statues and paintings that we see 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 there are still others who prefer the use of paper and paint. Not only are the materials used different, there are also many variation in the poses. Sometimes, the Buddha is portrayed in a sitting position, other times standing or reclining. Regardless of the material used or the pose portrayed, we can generally feel his compassion, magnanimity, and greatness.

Why are some statues of the Buddha sitting, while others are standing? Actually, each pose symbolizes a different aspect of the Buddha. In some cases, the Buddha is portrayed seated in the lotus position with his hands poised above his lap, in meditative concentration. This symbolizes his enlightenment. The Buddha became enlightened only by practicing over a very long period of time—meditating, contemplating, and knowing himself. At other times, we see the Buddha portrayed in a seated position with his left hand in his lap while raising his right hand, teaching the Dharma. This symbolizes that the Buddha cultivates 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, as if beckoning us sentient beings. When we feel lost in the sea of suffering, we are most happy 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 parinirvana. This posture symbolizes the utmost fulfillment in both merits and wisdom, when the state of birthlessness is reached. 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 be enduring. Upon entering parinirvana, the Buddha became one with all of nature and the flow of time. Thus, we say parinirvana is a transition from active engagement to tranquility. The images of the Buddha entering parinirvana show us that he is always in our hearts, ever present like the earth, and enduring like the sun and moon.

B. The First Wood Carving of the Buddha

When was the first statue of the Buddha carved? According to the *Agama Sutras*, the first Buddha statue was carved during the summer retreat one particular year when the Buddha disappeared from

his disciples. When the disciples realized that the Blessed One was nowhere to be found, they started asking around, but no one knew where he was. They then went to ask Ananda if he knew the whereabouts of the Buddha, but Ananda did not know. Ananda suggested that they should solicit the help of Aniruddha, who was foremost in supernatural vision. Using his supernatural vision, Aniruddha found out that the Buddha had gone to Trayastrimsas Heaven to teach the Dharma to his deceased mother, Queen Maya. Why did the Buddha leave for Trayastrimsas 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 around to teach them, some of his disciples had grown complacent and lax in attention to his teachings. Third, there had been some quarrels within the sangha, 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 was most reverent toward the Buddha, and he missed the presence of the Buddha so much that he fell ill. The

royal household put their heads together to find a way to make the king feel better. They all agreed that the best way was to find the best sculptor in the land and have him 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 in supernatural power, to help them. Using his supernatural power, Maudgalyayana transported a sculptor to Trayas-trimsas 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 his illness was cured.

After three months, the Buddha returned to our world. On his return, the statue actually came alive and walked to welcome the Buddha home. The Buddha smiled and said, “You must be tired from these three months. For future generations of sentient beings, it will be up to you to remind them of the truth.”

Thus, the first wooden image of the Buddha was

carved while he was still alive, before he entered parinirvana. The statue coming alive 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.

C. The First Metal Statue of the Buddha

In addition to carving Buddha statues out of wood, people also cast Buddha statues from different kinds of metals. When was the first metal statue of the Buddha cast? According to the *Agama Sutras*, this, too, happened while the Buddha was still alive. When King Prasenajit of Kosala learned that King Udayana had carved the Buddha's likeness out of sandalwood, he also wanted to create a likeness of the Buddha. On the one hand, he wanted to show his reverence for the Buddha; on the other hand, there was also a bit of a competitive spirit between him and King Udayana. King Prasenajit thus commissioned a statue of the Buddha to be cast in pure gold. The statue was again five feet tall and marked the beginning of casting metal images of the Buddha.

Separately and about the same time, the elder

Anathapindaka¹ also expressed his desire to cast a statue of the Buddha. One day after the Buddha finished teaching the Dharma in the Jetavana Grove, 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 everything is not as orderly 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 and gave his permission. 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 put decorations and flowers around the statue.”

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

¹ Also referred to as Sudatta or benefactor.

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

D. 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 *Agama Sutras*, we learn that one of the earliest paintings of the Buddha was completed when the Buddha was about to enter parinirvana. Maha-Kasyapa was concerned that King Ajatasatru of Magadha would be too grief-stricken with 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 get over this very difficult period.

In recent years, we have learned that there is an even earlier painting of the Buddha, perhaps even earlier than the first carved statue. The British Museum in England has in its collection many paintings of the Buddha. Among these paintings is one that the museum treasures most. It is a painting of the Buddha

when he was forty-one years old. It was painted by Purna, one of the Buddha's disciples, and the color is still very vibrant today. Photographs of this painting can be seen as far away as Japan and Taiwan.

Paintings of the Buddha were brought to China during the Han dynasty, about one thousand years after the Buddha entered parinirvana. During that time, many monks from China had traveled to India to study Buddhism. There they saw the sandalwood statue of the Buddha, which we discussed earlier, and wanted to bring it back to China so that the Chinese people would know what the Buddha looked like. Of course, the Indian kings did not want the statue to leave their land. So, 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 so that his people could pay their respects to the Buddha.

Since paintings are much less cumbersome than statues, it is customary for Buddhists to display paintings of the Buddha in their homes. 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.

E. Paying respect to holy 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 still pay our respects to these holy images of the Buddha. Some of you may ask: Why should we venerate these holy images of the Buddha?

First of all, we have to admit that we, indeed, do pay our respects to holy images of the Buddha. We all pay respect to certain symbols or images. We respect our national flag; a flag is a piece of cloth. Why do we pay respect to a piece of cloth? This is because a national flag, though made out of cloth, is much more than just a piece of cloth. It is a symbol of our country and the pride we have for our country. Christians also pay respect to the crucifix. A crucifix is made of wood or metal. Does it mean that Christians should not pray in front of the crucifix? There is absolutely nothing wrong with paying respect to certain symbols or images as long as we understand the goodness that

these symbols or images stand for.

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 shows no differentiation, but we look at it differently once it takes on the shape of its final product. A piece of paper with our parents' picture on it would be put in a safe place. The same piece of paper with a cartoon drawn on it could be tossed away at will, and we would not feel any remorse. A piece of metal that has been cast into a Buddha statue should be kept in a nice, 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 and minds, the statue stands for the fully enlightened Buddha. When we pay our respects to holy 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 in this fashion, then any image of the Buddha can strengthen our faith and touch our hearts. A Chinese saying, “When there is utmost sincerity and concentration, even stones or gold can open up,” may be interpreted to mean that if we are reverent whilst paying respect to statues of the Buddha, we will feel the presence of the Blessed One.

Actually, Buddhism is a religion that values intention over formality and teaches us to be totally free of all images, holy or not. There is an interesting gongan² from the Chan School which illustrates this point. Once Chan master Danxia Tianran took up residence at a certain monastery. That year there was a very severe winter, and the temperatures were very low. To stay warm, Danxia went up to the altar, took a wooden Buddha statue, and was about to use it to keep the fire going. 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, and he replied, “I

² “Public case” in Chan records.

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, 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 truly understood the essence of the teachings. He knew that mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are one and the same. When we are not yet enlightened, we should respect holy images. When we are enlightened, we will know that the Buddha dwells within us and is not to be found outside of ourselves or in some holy images.

Before Emperor Xuan of the Tang Dynasty became emperor, he was once a novice monk in a temple. Once he saw the Chan master Huangbo Xiyun in the shrine hall, paying his respect to the Buddha. As he stood behind the Chan master, he recalled what he had often heard the Chan master say and unknowingly spoke out loud, “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 and slapped the student in the face saying, “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 holy images often find it ludicrous that we do so. They do not realize that by paying respect to the Buddha, we are communicating with the Buddha.

II. What the Buddha Looked Like in Person

A. The Aura of the Buddha

The splendid appearance of the Buddha was a manifestation of the Dharma body—the pure, non-phenomenal Dharma body. About two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha was born into this world. He was most majestic in appearance and exhibited the “thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable characteristics.” In one of the sutras, it says, “The Buddha looks golden, radiant, pleasing, and majestic. The presence of the Buddha elicits joy and happiness in all sentient beings.”

Among the Buddha's disciples, there were many who were so moved by his majestic appearance that they decided to renounce their household life and follow him even before they heard him speak. Mahakasyapa was one such example. He was born to a wealthy Brahman family. One day, Mahakasyapa saw the Buddha resting under a tree and automatically was drawn to him. He went up to the Buddha, saluted him with joined palms, and decided right then that he wanted to join the Sangha. 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 who were vengeful or malicious. Devadatta, the Buddha's disciple and cousin, turned against him and hired six bandits to assassinate the Blessed One. 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.

Angulimalya, who was known for his ruthlessness, shuddered in fear in the presence of the Buddha and begged him for permission to join the Sangha.

Animals 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 mean to become peaceful. During the forty-five years or so of his teaching the Dharma, those who were moved by his majestic aura were too numerous to count.

B. The Resplendent Appearance of the Buddha

The sutras capture the golden appearance of the Buddha with the traditional “thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable characteristics.” Marks are more apparent, while characteristics are more subtle and harder to detect. Marks and characteristics are closely related; the latter stem from the existence of the former. The magnificent appearance of the Buddha did not happen by mere chance. It was the

result of cultivating and doing good 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. It was the result of his not speaking falsely. These marks and characteristics, which can be looked at symbolically, 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. Flat, even feet, without bumps or indentations
2. A mark of a thousand-spoked wheel on the bottom of his feet
3. Long slender fingers, as white as snow
4. Soft and smooth hands and feet
5. Toes and fingers finely webbed
6. Rounded heels, without any unevenness
7. Full and rounded feet, even from the front to the back
8. Fine thighs, like those of a royal stag
9. Hands reaching below the knees
10. A well-retracted male organ

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11. Height equal to the stretch of the arms
 12. Every hair-root darkly colored
 13. Body hair graceful and curly
 14. A golden-hued body
 15. A ten-foot nimbus
 16. Soft, smooth, and supple skin
 17. Soles, palms, shoulders, and crown
well-rounded
 18. Arm-pits well filled, without any sunken
spots
 19. A lion-shaped body
 20. A straight body
 21. Full shoulders
 22. Forty teeth
 23. White, clean, strong, and snugly-fitting
teeth
 24. Straight teeth
 25. Lion-jawed
 26. Saliva that improves the taste of food
 27. A broad, long tongue
 28. A deep, resonant voice
 29. Deep blue eyes
 30. Splendid eyelashes
 31. A curling white hair between the eyebrows,

radiating light

32. Fleishy protuberance on the crown

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. Big, thick ear lobes
5. A strong body
6. Snugly-fitting bones
7. Turns his whole body when turning, as does a majestic elephant
8. Leaves imprints as he walks
9. Radiant and polished feet
10. Full, rounded knees
11. A clean body
12. Soft, smooth skin
13. A straight, erect body
14. Round, slender fingers
15. Fine finger prints
16. Veins that are not visible
17. Well-concealed heel bones
18. A supple, fresh-looking body

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19. A round, pleasing body
 20. A brisk 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 perfect appearance
 29. Red-colored lips
 30. A voice that carries
 31. A deep, round navel
 32. Curly hair
 33. Long arms that reach below the knees
 34. Arms and legs that move freely
 35. Straight palm-lines
 36. Fine, long palm-lines
 37. Unbroken palm-lines
 38. Brings joy to those who see him
 39. A broad, perfect face
 40. A face full like the moon
 41. Eloquent and articulate speech
 42. Fragrant pores

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43. Fragrant breath
 44. Appearance awe-inspiring like that of a lion
 45. Gait steady like that of an elephant
 46. Steps airy like that of a goose
 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. Clean, unobstructed airway connecting the seven openings of the face
 56. Lotus-colored hands and feet
 57. A well-concealed navel
 58. A stomach that does not protrude
 59. A well-sized abdomen
 60. Does not fall down
 61. A sturdy, stable body
 62. Tall and big
 63. Soft, clean hands and feet
 64. A ten-foot nimbus

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65. His nimbus lights the way
 66. Treats all sentient beings equally
 67. A stately 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. Easy to understand
 73. Adapts his teachings according to the spiritual maturity of the listener
 74. Appearance that grows on others
 75. A pleasing appearance that does not tire others
 76. Long, healthy hair
 77. Long, neat hair
 78. Neatly curled hair
 79. Hair the color of green pearls
 80. A virtuous appearance

Depending on the sutra, there are slight variations in the details of these thirty-two marks and eighty characteristics. Actually, these marks of excellence and notable characteristics do not do justice to the Buddha's radiance. Take the example of the Buddha's

height. It was said that the Buddha was sixteen feet tall, but some people at that time were skeptical. One of these people tried to use a tape to measure the Buddha's height. He measured sixteen feet again and again, yet still could not measure the full height of the Buddha. Another distinguished feature of the Buddha was his broad, long tongue, and when the Buddha taught the Dharma, his voice could be heard far, far away. In the *Maharatnakuta 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 and could still hear the Buddha teaching the Dharma. Actually this is not hard to believe at all. Nowadays, people in Taiwan can receive radio broadcasts from places as far away as Europe or North America. The technology of radio broadcasting cannot compare to the skillful means of the Buddha. When the Buddha taught the Dharma, his voice could reach three thousand great chiliocosms. Thus, when we say that the Buddha has thirty-two marks and eighty notable characteristics, we are only describing the splendor that can be seen. Because of the limitations of our faculties, we do not even come close to capturing the

true splendor of the Buddha.

C. 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 no different. While the statues that we see of the Buddha mostly represent a certain stage in 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 Dipamkara Buddha³ 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 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 month,

³ A predecessor of Sakyamuni Buddha.

the Buddha was born in Lumbini Grove. After he was born, he took seven steps and proclaimed, “This is my last rebirth in the human world, for I have come here to become a buddha.” The prince was named Siddhartha Gautama.

4. Renouncing the household life: At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha wanted to find the way to be free from human suffering. Problems such as the caste system of discrimination, 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 the evil Mara⁴: The prince overcame the internal temptations of greed, hatred, and ignorance and the external temptations of sound, sight, and lure of power. To overcome these temptations, he drew on his inner strength and willpower.

6. Attaining enlightenment: On the eighth day of the twelfth month, while gazing at the starry sky, in a flash of insight, Siddhartha attained enlightenment and became the Buddha.

7. Turning the Dharma-wheel: After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha spent the next forty-five

⁴ A personification of our evil tendencies.

years or so teaching the Dharma.

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

While 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.

D. An Enlightened Being Still Suffers

When we look at the peaceful appearance of the Buddha in statues and drawings, we may automatically conclude that the Buddha must not have suffered. This is not the case at all. In reality, the Buddha was not only majestic in appearance, but also in the way he carried himself, especially in the face of adversity. The Buddha practiced what he preached; it would not be credible if the Buddha, who taught us about impermanence and suffering, did not have to go through these experiences. Like every one of us, 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 nature, but a manifestation intended to function in the phenomenal world. Living in the phenomenal 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 got a splinter from the poisonous acacia tree. On another occasion, Devadatta pushed a huge boulder from atop of Grdhrakuta Mountain down to where the Buddha was sitting. The Buddha's right foot was injured and bled. The Buddha also fell ill twice. At one time the Buddha was cured by the famous physician, Jivaka. On the second occasion, the Buddha suffered from backache. He asked Ananda to go into the village to get a cup of cow's milk and asked Mahakasyapa to bless the milk with his prayers. The pain subsided only after the Buddha consumed the milk. The Buddha also faced hunger twice. One year, there was a famine and, for a period of three months, the Buddha could only find the remains of horse feed to fill his hunger. There was also one occasion when

the Buddha went out for his alms round only to come back home empty-handed. He went hungry for that day.

In addition to physical hardships, the Buddha also had to deal with hostilities from others. A Brahman woman named Cincamanavika slandered the Buddha to his face. King Suprabuddha of the Koliya clan pointed his finger at the Buddha and openly criticized him. The Buddha was not at all bothered by others' ill feelings toward him. He was a great teacher and showed us by example how to behave in the face of adversity.

Some people had questions about why anything bad could happen to someone who had 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, and even the entering into 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 all goodness, refrain from any wrongdoing, and in this way, discover their own eternal *Dharmakaya*⁵. We all should wake up from the delusions of the phenomenal body and should not cling 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 compassion of the Tathagata.

Although we are not fortunate enough 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:

*Above and below the sky,
nothing compares to the Buddha,
Within the worlds of ten directions,
there is also no comparison.*

⁵ The body of truth.

*I have seen all in this world;
Nothing is as great as the Buddha.*

III. The Dharmakaya of the Buddha

A. Dharmakaya is Non-phenomenal

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha was born into this world. Though the Buddha has since entered nirvana, statues of him can be seen everywhere. The Buddha's magnificence and the "thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable characteristics" have just been discussed. Is the historic Buddha his true being? If not, what then is the ultimate being of the Buddha?

The true nature of the Buddha is referred to as the *Dharmakaya*⁶ of the Buddha. Dharmakaya is the true essence of the Buddha and is non-phenomenal. Since even bodhisattvas cannot see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha, how can we, blinded by our delusions, fare any better? Dharmakaya is independent of cause and action, without shape or form, without coming or going, without beginning or end. With such characteristics, how can we see the Dharmakaya of the

⁶ Also referred to as Dharma-body, spiritual body, or the body of Buddha's teachings.

Buddha?

To see what Dharmakaya is, we have to practice and experience it for ourselves. It is said in one of the sutras, “Eradicate a bit of ignorance, experience a bit of Dharmakaya.” Thus, we can see that Dharmakaya is something that cannot be experienced externally. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “The Dharma Nature is empty and tranquil; it cannot be attained nor seen. The emptiness of the dharma nature is the State of Buddhas⁷; it is not something that can be attained through reasoning.” Dharmakaya is beyond language, words, and thinking. In fact, it is said, “If one wishes to experience the Buddha-realm, one’s mind should be pure like space.” Dharmakaya is expansive like space; it is without shape and yet it is not shapeless; it is without form and yet it is not formless. Dharmakaya spans all ten directions⁸ and permeates the whole universe.

One time, Head Monk Fu of Taiyuan was at Yangzhou giving Dharma talks on the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. When he was at the point of

⁷ When you see your nature as empty, then you are in the State Buddhas.

⁸ The eight directions of the compass (N, E, S, W, NE, NW, SE, SW) and up and down.

trying to explain the nature of Dharmakaya, one Chan master in the audience could not help but snicker. After the Dharma talk, Head 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 Dharmakaya, I ask you to please suspend the Dharma talks for three days. During this time, you should enter into a state of absorption without any distraction. Then you can see for yourself what Dharmakaya is.”

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 seemed to have made some headway in his endeavor. He happily described to the Chan master the following:

*Truth of Dharmakaya, just like space,
Courses through three dimensions⁹,
spans ten directions.*

⁹ The three dimensions of time: past, present, and future.

*Covers eight trigrams¹⁰,
includes two polar opposites¹¹.
In tune with conditions¹²,
manifests through experience, is everywhere.*

From this incident, we learn that Dharmakaya is not something that can be understood from the shell of appearance. It is not something that can be explained with words. The physical appearance 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 spiritual body of the Buddha, is through our hearts and minds.

B. Phenomenal Manifestation of the Dharmakaya

Though Dharmakaya is non-phenomenal, we cannot say that we are totally unfamiliar with its

¹⁰ A trigram is a Taoist symbol consisting of three stacked lines. Each line may be complete or broken, giving eight possibilities. Taoists believe that the complete set of eight trigrams represents the whole universe.

¹¹ The yin and yang are the two polar opposites.

¹² This refers to causes and conditions.

wondrous workings. The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* says, “The true body of the Buddha is the Dharmakaya,¹³ not his majestic body or appearance. The Nirmanakaya¹⁴ is not apart from 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* points out that the threefold body, or nature, of the Buddha can be understood in terms of the Buddha’s Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya. The three are the body of truth (true nature), the body of bliss (reflection of past merits), and the body of transformation (physical manifestation). The three are different but not distinct for they are three aspects of the same body. The Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya are manifestations of the Dharmakaya. Apart from 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.

¹³ The true body of the Buddha that encompasses the entire universe.

¹⁴ The body that the Buddha manifests to teach sentient beings. The historical Buddha was Sakyamuni Buddha’s Nirmanakaya.

When the Buddha was alive in this world, he gave many Dharma talks. Among the listeners of these many Dharma talks, some saw the Buddha as golden, others silvery, or colors of various gems. Some people looked at the Buddha and saw a person, others saw the Buddha as having a golden body sixteen feet tall, and others yet saw the Buddha as being various heights. Even the voice of the Buddha was heard differently by different people. 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 related to alms-giving, others observing the precepts, or meditative concentration, or prajna, or helping others cross the sea of suffering. From these observations, we can surmise that when we speak of the radiant appearance of the Buddha, we are not speaking of ordinary good looks. These phenomena are the manifestations of the wondrous workings of the Dharmakaya.

The wondrous workings of the Dharmakaya are not just limited to our world. The sutras tell how the Buddha often appeared simultaneously in different worlds. The Buddha was also known by various names. He took on various forms and used different

methods to reach sentient beings. Are these not manifestations of the Dharmakaya? The manifestations of the Dharmakaya in our phenomenal world enable the Buddha to teach us in various ways and to teach all sentient beings in the three thousand chilocosms.

The *Mahayana-sraddhotpada Sastra* says: “The nature of Dharmakaya is prajna and radiance.” It permeates the whole dharma-world¹⁵. It is the truth. From this we can see that the Dharmakaya is the ground of all phenomena and that everything in this saha world is nothing but a phenomenal manifestation of the Dharmakaya. This is what Su Dongpo, the Chinese poet, meant when he wrote:

*All sounds of rippling creeks are broad,
long tongues.*

Mountains, nothing but pure bodies.

Another poem describes:

*Melancholic yellow flowers, nothing but prajna.
Lush green bamboos, all are Dharmakaya.*

¹⁵ The whole universe that includes the phenomenal and noumenal.

In the eyes of the enlightened, there is nothing that is not the Dharmakaya of the Buddha; there is nowhere that the Dharmakaya of the Buddha is not present. When the Buddha entered nirvana, he became one with the Dharmakaya. The Dharmakaya of the Buddha is in all phenomena, and all phenomena embody the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. Even today, the Buddha lives within us, and we live within the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. Not only do we live within the Dharmakaya of the Buddha, the whole of the universe lives within the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. The *Surangama Sutra* says, “The worlds of the universe in all ten directions are all in the heart of the Tathagata¹⁶—they are like clouds in the clear sky.” The heart of the Tathagata is the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. The Dharmakaya of the Buddha is the ground of all phenomena.

C. The Dharmakaya of the Buddha is Everywhere

The Dharmakaya of the Buddha is the true body of the Buddha. The Dharmakaya fills all worlds of the universe in all ten directions. Its radiance shines on

¹⁶ This means “such is,” another name for the Buddha.

countless Buddha Lands. The Dharmakaya is the state of the Buddha. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* describes the boundlessness of the Buddha State as follows: “All the water in oceans can be drunk up; all momentary thoughts can be counted; space can be measured and wind can be tied down; but the Buddha State cannot be fully described.” Even though it is everywhere, our delusion prevents us from seeing it. Only bodhisattvas who are well along the path of Buddhahood can always hear the Dharmakaya teaching the Dharma wherever they go. The sutras also tell us of the Buddha teaching his disciples 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 Dharmakaya of the Buddha is the true nature of all phenomena. If we understand the principle of dependent origination and see the emptiness of all phenomena, then we see the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “Where there are sutras, there are Buddhas.” When we believe in the Dharma, we believe in the Buddha. The Buddha is the fully enlightened one because the Buddha is in harmony with the Dharma, lives the Dharma, and is one

with the Dharma. If we do not believe 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 for the Nirmanakaya (body of transformation) of the Buddha were exhausted, the Buddha prepared himself to enter parinirvana. All his disciples were stricken with grief and at a loss for what to do. The Buddha said to them, “Please do not be sad. This phenomenal body is now aged, like an old cart that needs constant maintenance. One day the cart will break down. Even if I were to live with you all for yet tens of thousands of years, we would still have to say goodbye one day. This is an immutable law of nature. After I enter 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, if you follow and practice my teachings, 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. From the three complete trainings of precepts, meditative

concentration, and prajna, to the thirty-seven conditions (practices) leading to Buddhahood, to the Sangha teaching the Dharma—these are all manifestations of the Dharmakaya of the Buddha.

D. The Dharmakaya is Ever-present

The Dharmakaya is everywhere, but it is up to us, especially those of us who have dedicated our lives to the Sangha, to help sentient beings see the Dharmakaya. We bear a special responsibility to ensure that the teachings of the Buddha reach all corners of the world. The Buddha often 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 hearts and minds of the people of this world.

The following exchange occurred between an emperor of the Tang Dynasty and a Chan master. This exchange, in poetic form, highlights the Dharmakaya as ever present and 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:

*“From where did the Buddha come?
After nirvana, to where did the Buddha go?
Since we say the Buddha is ever present
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;
Lives always in undeluded minds.
With-thought restores to without-thought;
Attachment returns to non-attachment.
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,
And have no doubts.”*

The emperor, still doubting, asked further:

*“The Buddha, born in a palace,
Died and entered nirvana, between two trees.
Taught in this world for forty-nine years;
Yet pronounced 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 can say that they are not subject
to birth and death?
I still have some questions;
Wise one, please explain.”*

The Chan master again replied:

*“The Nature of Buddha is truth.
The deluded do not understand.
The Dharmakaya is like space;
Has no birth nor death.
With right conditions,
Buddha appears in this world;
When right conditions pass,
Buddha enters nirvana.
Reaching sentient beings everywhere,
The Buddha is like the moon in the water.
Not permanent and yet not intermittent;
No birth and no death.
Lives, yet is never born;
Enters nirvana, yet has not ceased.*

*When mind sees emptiness,
There is no Dharma to speak of.”*