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## THE NOTION OF DHARMAKĀYA :

### A Study in the Buddhist Absolute

The question of the nature of the Absolute in Buddhism remains a topical issue, and one point immediately raised in this regard is whether it is proper at all to apply the term "Absolute," with all its connotations in Western philosophy, in referring to what is considered of ultimate value in Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Granting the justifiability of the application with due awareness of its proper Buddhist context, questions concerning its interpretation, and further, its similarities and differences with the Judaeo-Christian notion of

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1. JBA — *Annual Report of the Japanese Buddhist Association (Nihon Bukkyo-gaku Kyokai Nenpo)*
  - JIBS — *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies (Indo-gaku Bukkyo-gaku Kenkyu)*
  - JRS — *Journal of Religious Studies (Shuko Kenkyu)*
  - Keisei — Takasaki Jikido, *Nyoraizo shiso no Keisei* (Formation of the Tathagatagarbha Theory, A Study on the historical Background of the Tathagatagarbha Theory of Mahayana Buddhism based on the Scriptures Preceding the *Ratnagotravibhaga*) Tokyo : Shunju-sha, 1974).
  - MSA — Sylvain Levi, ed., *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (Paris: Librairie Honore Champion, 1907).
  - RGV — E.H. Johnston, ed., *Ratnagotravibhaga Mahayanottaratantrasastra* (Patna : The Bihar Research Society, 1950).
  - Study — Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhaga (Uttaratantra) Being a Treatise on the Tathagatagarbha Theory of Mahayana Buddhism* (Roma : Istitite Italiano, per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, 1966).
  - T. — *Taisho Shinshu Daizo-kyo*  
(Vol. numbers indicated in Arabic).

See *Study*, p.20, note 31. Also, T.R.V. Murti, in his *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London : George Allen & Unwin, 1955), makes bold use of the term "Absolute" in its Buddhist context seen in comparative light with Western philosophical systems. See also J.W. de Jong, "The Problem of the Absolute in the Madhyamaka School," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* II (1972), 1-6, and likewise D. Soyfort Ruegg, "On the Knowability and Expressibility of Absolute Reality in Buddhism," *JIBS* XX (1971), 495-487; Jikido Takasaki, "Description of Ultimate Reality By Means of the Six Categories in Mahayana Buddhism." "*JIBS* IX (1961), 740-731 (also in *Study*, Appendix III, pp.400-408); and Koshiro Tamaki, "The Absolute in Mahāyāna Buddhism—Possible Conditions of our Understanding," *JIBS* XIII (1965), 443-436.

God or with the *Brahman* of Indian philosophy, etc., come up as issues of scholarly interest. From within Buddhism itself, the different schools present various and sometimes contrasting approaches to what is considered of ultimate value, and these approaches in turn have bearing on the religious practice considered necessary towards its attainment.<sup>2</sup>

The different periods in the history of Buddhist thought present various stages in the development of the understanding of the Absolute. Two key terms which can be regarded as cornerstones for its understanding are, of course, the two basic items of the Threefold Jewel, *Buddha*, and *Dharma*.<sup>3</sup> Another term which refers to the attained state or state to be attained, and which has caught the attention of many Western scholars, is *nirvāna*.<sup>4</sup> Further, the various sūtras and treatises of Mahāyāna Buddhism present a variety of terms which represent particular points of view and systematic interpretations of the Absolute, such as *sūnyata*, *dharmatā*, *prakṛti*, *tathatā*, *paramārtha*, *dharmadhātu*, *dhārmakāya*, etc.<sup>5</sup> Of these, the term *dharmakāya*, which itself has undergone a complicated process of development in meaning, is of particular interest, and has played a significant role in the history of Buddhist thought, serving as a recurrent point of controversy among Buddhist masters of India, China and Japan.

2. Numerous examples can be given from within the long history of Buddhism through India, China and Japan, but to mention just one, the differences between the religious attitude and practice of the followers of Pure Land and Zen present interesting contrasts. Suzuki Daisetsu, in his *Nihon-teki Reisei* (Japanese Spirituality) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1972) presents these two streams as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive or contradictory.
3. Studies on the richness of the implications of the term *dharma* abound. On its significance within Indian thought in general, see Nakamura Hajime, *Indo Shisō no Shomondai* (Various Problems in Indian Thought) (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 1967), pp. 177-204. See also Tamaki Koshiro, "Ho (*Dharma*)," an entry in Oguchi Iichi and Hori Ichiro, ed., *Shukyo-gaku Jiten* (Dictionary of Religious Studies), pp. 672-677, which also provides a bibliography. A recent work to be noted is the Commemoration Volume in honour of Dr. Hirakawa Akira, *Bukkyō ni okeru Hō no Kenkyū* (Studies on *Dharma* in Buddhism) (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 1975).
4. See Guy R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvāna and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) for a survey treatment, and also the review of this book in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* I (1971), 396-403.
5. For one thoughtful study, see Jikido Takasaki, "Dharmatā, Dharmadhātu, Dharmakāya, and Buddhadhātu Structure of the Ultimate Value in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *JIBS* XIV (1966), 919-903.

In this paper I propose to examine this term in order to bring out some of its prominent implications, as one attempt at understanding the meaning of the Absolute in Buddhism. For this study, our basic source is the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga Mahāyānōttaratantraśāstra*,<sup>6</sup> an important Indian Mahāyāna treatise which expounds the "ultimate meaning of the Mahāyāna" while giving a systematic exposition of the *Tathagatagarbha* Theory.<sup>7</sup>

Before going into the doctrine of the RGV concerning *dharmakāya*, a survey of the backgrounds of this term will help situate our problem.

### I. Backgrounds of the Term *Dharmakāya*

The main component of the Sanskrit compound *dharmakāya* is the term *dharma* (Pali, *dhamma*), regarded as "the central conception of Buddhism."<sup>8</sup> In Pali texts, the association of *dhamma* (truth, teaching, way, etc.) with its expounder, the *Buddha*, further leads to the appellation of the latter as *dhammakāya*, or "he who has dhamma for his (as his) body."

The following famous passage brings out this point.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, O Vakkali, whosoever sees the *dhamma* sees me; whosoever sees me sees the *dhamma*. Indeed, O Vakkali, one seeing the *dhamma* sees me, one seeing me sees the *dhamma*.

This inseparable link between *Dhamma* and the *Buddha* (or *Tathāgata*) is again the theme of the following passage:<sup>10</sup>

He who has placed his faith in the *Tathāgata*, is rooted and firmly established in his faith, unshaken neither by recluse nor Brahmin.

6. Text ed. by E.H. Johnston, seen through the press by T. Chowdhury (Patna: The Bihar Research Society, 1950).

7. See *Study*, and especially *Keisei*. These two monumental works by Dr. Takasaki, the first being an annotated English translation of the RGV and the second being an extensive study of the various stages of development of the *Tathagatagarbha* Theory up to the RGV, are epoch-making contributions to research in this area. For another study relying mainly on the Tibetan tradition, see D. Seyfort Rugg, *La Theorie du Tathagatagarbha et du Gotra, Etudes sur la Soteriologie et la Gnoseologie du Bouddhisme* (Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, 1969).

8. See T. Stcherbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the word "Dharma"* (London 1923; republished in Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1956), and also note 3, above.

9. *Samyuttaplikāya* III, 120.

10. *Digha Nikāya* III, 84.

nor deva nor by Brahma nor by anyone in the world—he may rightly say, “I am the Lord’s own son, born of his mouth, born of *dhamma*, formed by *dhamma*, heir to *dhamma*.” What is the reason for this? It is because this is a synonym for the Tathāgata: “he who has the *dhamma* for his body (*dhammakāya*),” and again, “he who has Brahman for his body (*Brahmakāya*),” and again, “he whose being is of *dhamma* (*dhammabhūta*),” and again, “he whose being is of Brahman (*Brahmabhūta*).”

A passage from *The Questions of King Milinda* is noted for its use of *dhammakāya*.<sup>11</sup>

... the Lord has attained perfect repose in the nirvāna-realm without remaining elements. The Lord has gone home like the setting sun; it is not possible to point to him, saying, “Here he is,” or “There he is.” However, O King, it is possible to point to the Lord by that which has the *dhamma* as a body (*dhammakāya*); for the *dhamma*, O King, was taught by the Lord.

In the Pāli texts one can discern the profound respect and esteem the disciples had for their Teacher, as well as their absolute allegiance to the truth which he taught *dhamma*. This is a twofold allegiance which is to remain throughout the history of Buddhism, and the coexistence of these two poles of allegiance is to bring about problems concerning priority, i.e. concerning the choice of emphasis in what is to be considered as of absolute value.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, the *dhamma* is revered as the tested way to deliverance, as the expression of the ultimate truth of existence, the realization of which leads beings from the basic suffering that characterizes their lot. The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Truth of Dependent Origination, etc., can thus be taken as summarized presentations of the *dhamma*, the truth realized by the Enlightened One which he in turn taught to all.

11. V. Trenckner, ed., *Milindapañho* (London: Pali Text Society, 1880), p. 73. Perhaps more simply *dhammakāya* could be translated here as “the collection of teachings.”
12. See Tamura Yoshiro, “Nin-honzon to Ho-honzon (Person-Centered and Truth-Centered Faith-Object),” *Chuo Gakujustu Kenkyusho Kiyo* I (1970). 6–21, and also the same author’s “Butsu no Choetsu-sei (Transcendence of the Buddha),” JRS No. 146 (1955), 272, and “Bukkyo ni okeru Zettai-kan (Views of the Absolute in Buddhism),” JRS No. 180 (1965), 67–90.

On the other hand, the profound esteem and reverence held for the Teacher while he was still alive turned into a distinct kind of veneration after his demise. This worshipful veneration lies at the root of the divinization process which the image of the Buddha later underwent.<sup>13</sup> This veneration and its resultant divinization of the Buddha can already be discerned in various stages in the Pāli texts which have come down to us. For instance, the Buddha is portrayed as a super-being who has conquered death,<sup>14</sup> as one who, through his enlightenment, has penetrated the truth of all existence and who therefore possesses a knowledge of all things.<sup>15</sup> Because of this omniscience, he is even superior to all the gods<sup>16</sup>—a veritable supreme being.

As such, the Buddha himself becomes an object of faith, on par with the ultimate truth which he taught: the veneration of the Buddha as well as the *dhamma* is a basic element of Buddhist faith, and a later addition of the *saṅgha* or Holy Community as an object of veneration led to the expression of the Triple Veneration Formula as a credal element.<sup>17</sup>

As the image of the Buddha in the minds of the disciples underwent a divinization process, speculations concerning how he had come to attain such a divinized state arose: such an attainment came to be seen as the result of the accumulation of meritorious deeds performed over countless lives in the past. *Jātaka* stories, whose sources can be traced in Indian folklore, which relate of the Buddha's previous lives performing meritorious deeds in various forms, thus came about as expressions of popular Buddhist piety. The Buddha came to be depicted as one in the stage of the *bodhisattva*, or being-in-search-of-enlightenment, undergoing a long process of religious practice in the pursuit of his goal.

13. See Nakamura Hajime, *Gotama Buddha* (Tokyo: Hozokan, 1958), pp. 306–338; Revised ed., (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 197), for a study of the stages of the divinization process as gauged by the various appellations accorded to the Buddha after his demise.

14. *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 111. Also *Samyutta Nikāya* IV, 94–95.

15. *Digha Nikāya* III, Ch. 33, gives an account of the various truths known and taught by the Enlightened One, portraying the latter as an omniscient being.

16. *Digha Nikāya* I, 49.

17. Nakamura Hajime, "Genshi Bukkyo Seiten Seiritsu Kenkyu Kijun ni tsuite (On Criteria for Research in the Development of Early Buddhist Scriptures)," *JBA XXI* (1955), 31–78, gives examples of textual evidence which indicate that *Buddha* and *Dharma* comprised a twofold object of veneration at an earlier stage prior to the use of the Triple Veneration Formula (i.e. with the *Saṅgha* as the third element).

The *bodhisattva* ideal thus arose as one that all beings are called upon to strive for, and the rise of this ideal has been pointed out as linked to the early development of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

If this search for enlightenment is an ideal open to all men, it can be asked whether beings other than Gotama Śākyamuni had in fact attained this goal of enlightenment. Thus, in this context, various theories of multiple Buddhas arose, and different Buddhas of the past, present, and future came to be posited.<sup>19</sup>

In the wake of multiple Buddha theories, the Mahāyāna sūtra entitled *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka* (The Lotus of the Wonderful Law, or simply, Lotus Sūtra)<sup>20</sup> stood out as placing emphasis on one Buddha identified with Śākyamuni, portrayed as existing since time immemorial, casting his merciful glance upon all living beings suffering in the triple world and employing all sorts of means (*upāya-kauśalya*) in order to make them aware of their situation and seek deliverance from it. The notion of the everlasting Buddha as portrayed in the lotus Sūtra serves as the germ to which later developments in the notion of *dharmakāya* can be linked.<sup>21</sup> In passing, it may be mentioned that the term *dharmakāya* also appears in this sūtra, though in this instance it shows none of the metaphysical nuances found in later treatises.<sup>22</sup>

The rise of the Mahāyāna likewise brought about new levels of understanding of the Buddhist *dharma*. Or rather, one might say, new levels of understanding of the *dharma* characterized the rise of the Mahāyāna, although the Mahāyāna exponents regarded their own teaching as a return to the original sense of the *dharma* as taught by the Founder: they

18. See Hirakawa Akira, *Shoki Daijō-bukkyō no Kenkyū* (Studies in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism) (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 1968). Also, the same author's *Indo Bukkyo Shi* (History of Indian Buddhism), Vol. I (Tokyo: shunjū-sha, 1975).

19. For an outlined presentation of various stages in the development of views on the Buddha, see Tamura Yoshiro, *Hokke-kyō* (The Lotus Sūtra) (Tokyo: Chūkyō Shinsho (1969), pp. 87-113. See also Kamei Munetada, "Kako-butsu Shisō yori Hosshin Jōzai Shisō ni Oyobu (From the Theory of Buddhas-of-the past to the Theory of the Eternal Existence of Dharmakāya-Buddha)," *Shūkyō Ronshū* I (1931), 73-86. Further research in this area is still pending, and the examination of various texts can lead to further perspectives.

20. Text ed. by H. Kern and B. Nanjio. (St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica, 1909).

21. See Tamura, *Hokke-kyō*, pp. 87ff.

22. Kern and Nanjio edition, p. 143. The text goes: *Sa pasyati mahaprajno dharmakayam aśesatah . . .* (He, the man of great wisdom, shall see the Truth in its entirety without exception . . .)

contended that this original sense had been beclouded by the Abhidharma commentators in their preoccupation with analyses of constitutive elements (*dharmāḥ*) who thus lost sight of its more fundamental implications. For the Mahāyāna exponents, the basic truth that underlies all things is to be grasped as one realizes that everything is empty, i.e. devoid of substantial reality. This "emptiness" or "void" (*śūnyatā*) is the Truth that underlies all things (*śravadharmāṇāṃ dharmatā*).<sup>23</sup>

This understanding of the fundamental truth of Buddhism in the light of *śūnyatā* comes to have bearing on speculations concerning the essential nature of the Buddha: he comes to be identified with this ultimate truth itself, as one essentially possessed of the nature of emptiness.<sup>24</sup> Thus the *real* Buddha is taught to be beyond the reach of the senses: the Buddha who was seen by men in human form (i.e. Śākyamuni) is one that does not embody the essence of Buddhahood, as the essence is beyond the reach of the senses. Here the distinction between the Buddha who came possessed of bodily form (*rūpakāya*) and the essential Buddha who is the embodiment of Truth (*dharmakāya*) becomes accentuated, giving rise to a twofold Buddha-body theory.<sup>25</sup>

*Dharmakāya* thus refers to the essential nature of Buddhahood, and this essential nature is conceived likewise as inseparable from enlightenment. With this another nuance of the term *dharmakāya* comes in, where

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23. See Nakamura Hajime, "Kegon-kyō no Shisō-shiteki Igi (The Significance of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra in the History of Thought)," Kawada Kumataro and Nakamura Hajime, ed., *Kegon Shisō* (Avataṃsaka, or Hua Yen Philosophy) (Tokyo: Hōzōkan, 1960), pp. 83-146, esp. p. 98-99, where various instances of this term and its synonyms are examined.
24. For example, *Mūlamadhyamakārikāh* XXII, 16. Text ed. by L. de la vallee Poussin (St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica. 1912), pp. 448-449.
25. The gist of this theory in its early form consists in this distinction between that body which represents the essence of Truth (*dharmatā*), identified with *śūnyatā* and which is emphasized as inaccessible to the senses, and the manifested or visible body which in this context is understood as a "mere" manifestation not embodying the "real" Buddha. This two-body view can thus be regarded as a "Copernican revolution" in Buddhism, as it shifted the emphasis from the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, to a metaphysical entity, the "essential Buddha" equated with Truth itself. This is thus a turning-point in the development of Mahāyāna metaphysical speculation on the nature of Buddhahood, given impetus with the rise of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and with the writings of Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250). For example, see R. Mitra, ed., *Astasahasrika Prajñāpāramitā* Bibliotheca Indica (Calcutta, 1888) p. 513, 15-16, and E. Conze, ed., *Vajracchedika Prajñāpāramitā* (Roma: Institute Italiano per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, 1957), pp. 56-57, etc.

*dharmā* is understood to mean "quality" or "virtue"—the term *āveṇikā-buddha dharmāḥ* or "qualities peculiar to the Buddha, qualities associated with enlightenment, presents this meaning. In this context *dharmakāya* includes the nuance of "the body possessing qualities associated with enlightenment."<sup>26</sup> And as this enlightenment is inseparable from its resultant wisdom (*jñāna*), the link between *dharmakāya* and *jñāna* becomes emphasized.<sup>27</sup>

The introduction of another term, *dharmadhātu*, in Mahāyāna metaphysics, brings about further development.<sup>28</sup> *Dharmadhātu* comes to be used synonymously with *dharmakāya*, meaning the universal truth-sphere of all things. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* especially makes good use of this term in bringing out the teaching of the universal presence of the Buddha. This sūtra leaves a strong theistic flavour with its presentation of *Vairocana Buddha* as the Buddha of Universal Light, whose presence knows no bounds.<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of these developments, speculation concerning the nature of the Buddha reached new levels and received renewed impetus. It is in the light of this background that we can situate the metaphysical nuances attached to the term *dharmakāya* as expounded in some sūtras that played key roles in the development of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, inconsistencies and inherent difficulties in attempts to give explanations of twofold Buddha-body theory paved the way for threefold and, later, fourfold Buddha-body theories.<sup>31</sup> As we shall see further in our

26. See Keisei p. 764.

27. See Takasaki, Jikido, "Amuktajñā no Gogi ni tsuite (On the meaning of *amuktajñā*)" JIBS VI (1958), 186-90.

28. See Takasaki, "Dharmatā, Dharmadhātu . . ." (Note 5, above, esp. pp. 914-911).

29. T. 9, pp. 405-421b. Also, Takasaki, "Dharmatā, Dharmadhātu . . .," p. 910. *Vairocana Buddha* is to become a central figure in Esoteric Buddhism, with the appellation becoming *Mahāvairocana Buddha*, and with this a new chapter in the development of views on the Buddha is ushered in.

30. Notably the *Anuśāstapāraṇīyavānirveda* T. 16, pp. 466-468, and the *Jñānalokalaṅkārasūtra*, T. 12, pp. 238-250; 250-253; 253-265. Keisei, pp. 68-90, and pp. 604-638 respectively, explores the background and content of these sūtras.

31. The fourfold-body theory of the Buddha appears as a ramification of the three-body theory, and different versions can be found. The *Buddha-bhāmyupadeśa*, T. 26, pp. 291-328, presents one version. Haribhadra's works (ca. eighth century) present another version: see Amano Koei, "Haribhadra no Busshin-ron (The Buddhological Theory of Haribhadra)," JRS No. 179 (1964), 277-307, on this point. The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* has also been interpreted as presenting a fourfold-body theory, but this remains problematic compounded by interpretative elements of the Chinese translations. This, however, is beyond our present scope.



treatment of the teaching of the RGV, difficulties and contrasts in these explanations can be traced to different modes of understanding the basic term *dharmakāya*.

These contrasting explanations concerning the theories of the Buddha-body also caught the attention of Buddhist masters and thinkers in China, and they took up this theme of the Buddha-body, attempting systematic arrangements and interpretations.<sup>32</sup>

The investigation of the different shades of meaning and implications of *dharmakāya*, together with its role in the systematic frameworks of the different Buddhist thinkers through the history of Buddhism in India, China and Japan, remains a monumental task still to be done. Here we propose only to bring to light some elements as can be discerned from one influential Indian Mahāyāna treatise, the RGV. The breadth of the tradition that the RGV inherits,<sup>33</sup> as well as the role it has played in later Mahāyāna thought in general,<sup>34</sup> can perhaps serve to justify our choice of this treatise as a point of reference.

The following three sections treat of the RGV's teaching concerning *dharmakāya* from three different angles: the *dharmakāya* seen as the universal body of the Buddha encompassing all living beings (Section II); as the synonym for Tathāgata or Buddhahood itself in the state of perfection (Section III); and as the pivotal element in the Buddha-body theory (Section IV).

## II. *Dharmakāya* as Universal Body Encompassing all Living Beings

The underlying problematic with which the Tathāgatarbha Theory as developed in the RGV starts off is the question concerning the link between ordinary living beings on the one hand, and the Buddha on the other. It is in the treatment of this problem that the term *dharmakāya* is brought in to

32. For a diagrammatic treatment of different interpretations of the Buddha-body theory, see Shioda Gison, "Busshin-ron no Tenkai (Development of Buddha-body Theories)," *JIBS VII* (1959), 120-123.

33. See *Study*, pp. 32-45, 54-61, and *Keisei* as a whole.

34. The significance of the Tathāgatarbha Theory in the development of later Mahāyāna thought especially in China and Japan has only recently begun to be appreciated, especially in the discovery of its link with the widely-debated problem of Buddha-nature.

strengthen the argument that "all living beings are (possessed of the) Tathāgatagarbha."<sup>35</sup>

The universal body (*dharmakāya*) of the Tathāgata penetrates all living beings.<sup>36</sup>

... all living beings without exception are penetrated by the universal body of the Tathāgata.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, there is not one being among the sphere of living beings who exists apart from the universal body of the Tathāgata, just as no physical form can exist apart from space.<sup>38</sup>

In these passages, *dharmakāya* is presented as the principle of unity of all living beings, whereby they are seen as enveloped in the universal presence of the Tathāgata.<sup>39</sup> In short, it is taught that all living beings are worthy of the name Tathāgatagarbha because they are penetrated by this universal body of the Tathāgata.<sup>40</sup>

A significant point to note here is that *dharmakāya* is used synonymously with *buddhajñāna* (the Buddha's wisdom, or the wisdom of enlightenment proper to the Buddha). It is this wisdom of the Buddha which is first presented as penetrating all living beings, after which the term *dharmakāya* is used substitutively.<sup>41</sup> This teaching on the all-pervasiveness of the Buddha's

35. The phrase *sarvasattvās tathāgatagarbhāḥ* is the keynote of the theory, and the multiple-levelled meaning of this phrase accounts for the subtlety of the theory. See Keisei pp. 21-22.

36. RGV. 26 : 8/.

37. RGV 70 : 16-17/.

38. RGV 70 : 18-19.

39. Two other terms employed as principles of unity between Tathāgata and living beings are *tathatā* and *gotr*.

40. RGV 26 : 1.

41. Here one must note the distinction between basic or main verses, commentary verses, and prose commentary, which make up different levels in the structure of the RGV text, as pointed out by Takasaki in *Study*, pp. 10-19, and in his "Kukyo-Ichijo-Hoshoron no Kozo to Genkei (The Structure and Original Form of the RGV)," *JRS* No. 160 (1958), 14-33. See the re-examination of Takasaki's thesis by L. Schmithausen, "Philologische Bemerkungen zum RGV," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XV (1971), 123-177. The distinction in these levels becomes an element in the consideration of the problem of authorship as well as of the thought-content of the RGV as a whole. However, we prescind from these issues in this research, taking as our point of departure the RGV text as it stands.

wisdom in all living beings reveals the influence on the RGV of a section of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* whose doctrine was in turn taken up by the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, a basic source of the RGV.<sup>42</sup>

The universal extent of the Buddha's wisdom is, of course, a doctrine traceable to a much earlier stage of the history of Buddhism. In Pāli texts, the Buddha is depicted as having penetrated the secrets of existence, and thus, consequently, as the knower of all things.<sup>43</sup> There is nothing which escapes the wisdom of the Enlightened One. Linked with this omniscience attributed to the Buddha is the capacity to see all things as they are with his enlightened eyes (*buddhacakkhū*): the Buddha is depicted as possessed of a universal, all-seeing eye (*samantacākkhu*).<sup>44</sup>

This doctrine is likewise reflected in earlier Mahāyāna texts, where this link between the Buddha's wisdom and his universal, all-seeing Eyes of Enlightenment.<sup>45</sup>

In the Lotus Sūtra, there appears a twofold sphere of this wisdom, a twofold distinction of the object of his Eyes of Enlightenment. First, the Tathāgata in his wisdom sees the real nature of things, things as they really are (*yathābhūtam*): that "there is no birth, no death, no change, no arising, no *samsāra*, no *nirvāṇa*, no being, no non-being. . . etc."<sup>46</sup> This is the ultimate truth of all things penetrated by the wisdom of the Tathāgata, a truth which transcends the common sense of ordinary men, and which can be expressed only in such a form of negation of things that common sense takes for granted.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, with his enlightened vision the Tathāgata observes living beings as they suffer in the triple world, and in his compassion the desire to

42. See Takasaki Jikido, "Kegon-kyogaku to Nyoraizo-Shiso-Indo ni okeru Shoki-shiso no Tenkai (The Hua Yen Philosophy and the Tathāgatagarbha Theory-Development of the Idea of *Gairasambhava* in India)," in Kawada and Nakamura, ed., *Kegon shiso*, pp. 275-332. See also the English article based on this study, "The *Tathāgatōtpattisambhāvānirdeśa* of the *Avatamsaka*, and the *Ratnagotravibhāga* with special reference to the term *Tathāgatagoīrasambhāva*," in JIBS VII (1958), 348-343.

43. See for example, *Dīgha Nikāya* III, Ch. 33. Also, *Sutta Nipāta* nos. 211, 947, etc., and *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 111.

44. *Sutta Nipāta*, no. 1133.

45. Conze, ed., *Vajracchedika*, pp. 50-51, 60-61.

46. Kern and Nanjio, ed., *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, p. 318:8.

47. One well-known passage is the opening verse of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhamakakārikā* I, 1-2 presenting the "eightfold negation."

bring these beings out of their suffering arises. Here he makes use of skilful means (*upāya-kauśalya*) first to make living beings notice how they are in a miserable situation, and thus to seek liberation from it. These skillful means are again linked with his wisdom brought into practical use.<sup>48</sup>

The portrayal of the Buddha as casting his compassionate glance upon all beings and making use of skilful means towards their liberation can likewise be seen in other Mahāyāna sūtras, but this motif assumes a different nuance in the *Tathāgātōtatpīsamabhava-nirdeśa* of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*:<sup>49</sup> Here, the wisdom of the Tathāgata, heretofore portrayed as *subject*, becomes something objectified, reified, as in the following passage:<sup>50</sup>

There is no one among the group of living beings in whose body the Wisdom of the Tathāgata does not penetrate at all. Nevertheless, as talking (wrong) conceptions, he cannot cognize the Buddha's Wisdom (residing in himself). By removing this taking of conceptions, the Wisdom of Ommiscience, self-born Wisdom, makes its appearance again unobstructedly. . .

. . . Therefore the Tathāgata, having observed the state of all the living beings in all the universal region by his unobstructed Wisdom, with his Marvellous perception, (says): 'What a pity! These living beings cannot cognize properly the Wisdom of the Tathāgata, though it penetrates them. O! I shall try to withdraw all the obstacles made by wrong conceptions for the sake of these living beings through the teaching of (the Eightfold) Holy Path, in order that they would by themselves, by accepting the power of the Holy Path, cast off the big knot of conceptions and would recognize the Wisdom of the Tathāgata (within themselves), so that they would obtain equality with the Tathāgata. (In accordance with this declaration), they remove all the obstacles made by wrong conceptions through the teaching of the (Holy) Path of the Tathāgata. And when all the obstacles created by wrong conceptions are withdrawn, then this immeasurable Wisdom of the Tathāgata becomes useful to all the world

48. See Kern and Nanjio edition, *Saddharma Pūṇḍarīki Sūtra*, p. 317.

49. T. 9, pp. 614-631. Also, T. 10, pp. 592-617, and T. 10, pp. 262-278 for other versions. A Tibetan translation also exists (*The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Peking edition, Vol. 59 pp. 75-152).

50. RGV 22:10-24:8. See *Study*, pp. 189-92.

The teaching of the above passage is that the wisdom of the Tathāgata *resides in*, penetrates into all living beings without exception, though these beings do not notice its presence, as they are misled by erroneous views. Thus, this wisdom remains in a dormant state, waiting to be activated. Its actual presence can be perceived only by the Buddha himself with his Eyes of Enlightenment, and this vision moves him to make use of different skilful means to activate this wisdom lying dormant in beings.

At this point one notes the *objectification* of the Buddha's wisdom in the treatment: in addition to that (subjective) aspect whereby the Buddha in his wisdom gazes at all living beings in their state of suffering, the *object* of the gaze is depicted as none other than *that very wisdom* itself, residing in living beings, covered as it is by erroneous conceptions and therefore not visible to these ordinary living beings. The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* which also takes up this motif,<sup>51</sup> identifies this covering with defilements and lusts which ordinary living beings are subject to. This sūtra further refers to the wisdom, the eye, the body of the Tathāgata as the hidden elements perceptible only to the Tathāgata himself.<sup>52</sup> The RGV then takes this up and makes use of suggestive terminology: the Buddha in his gaze of wisdom perceives his own nature (*svadharmatā*),<sup>53</sup> the jewel of enlightenment (*sambuddharatna*),<sup>54</sup> his very own self (*sugatātmabhāva*)<sup>55</sup> amidst all the covering, as universally pervading all beings. In short what the Tathāgata perceives is his own essence (*tathāgatadhātu*) as it penetrates all living beings.

This notion of *tathāgatadhātu* is central throughout the RGV, and is the key notion in its exposition of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory.<sup>56</sup> The universal presence of this essence of the Tathāgata in all living beings is the basis for the monistic standpoint of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory.

From these considerations we can see that the term *dharmakāya* is used synonymously with *tathāgatadhātu* insofar as it means this all-pervading essence of the Tathāgata identified with the objectified sense of his wisdom. But at the same time the subjective aspect of this wisdom is not overlooked — the Buddha does not cease to gaze upon all living beings who are penetrated in his very own wisdom without their noticing it. This subjective aspect

51. T. 16, pp. 457-466.

52. T. 16, p. 457.

53. RGV 60 : 16-17.

54. RGV 63 : 5-6.

55. RGV 64 : 17-18.

of the Buddha's wisdom is inseparable from his great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) which leads him to make use of every kind of skilful means to deliver living beings from their plight.

Thus the use of the term *dharmakāya* in the explanation of the Tathāgatarbha Theory to emphasize the unity of ordinary living beings and the Tathāgata through the all-pervasiveness of the Buddha's wisdom implies these two above-mentioned facets: the facet synonymous with *tathāgatadhātu* as an objectified universal entity, and the facet synonymous with Tathāgata as a subjective, one could say personal, active entity working for the welfare of all living beings.

One can venture to say that the latter, subjective facet was prominent in earlier Buddhist texts, while the former, objectified facet of wisdom gradually came to the fore with the teaching of the *Tathāgatōtpattisambhava Nirdeśa* of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, and came to be identified with *tathāgatadhātu* in further development.

This *tathāgatadhātu* is explained by the RGV as found in three states (*avasthā*): the state of the ordinary being who remains covered with defilement thus leaving this essence of Buddhahood to lie dormant; the state of the bodhisattva who has begun to activate this essence composed of wisdom and compassion, through his religious striving which falls into various stages;<sup>57</sup> and finally, the state of the Buddha in full perfection, wherein all the defilements and their remnants have been expelled thus letting this heretofore dormant essence come out and shine in full brilliance, manifesting innumerable virtues, qualities associated with wisdom and compassion. The RGV also refers to this perfected state of the Buddha by the term *dharmakāya*, and its description of this state is a treasure-house for the investigation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist conception of the Absolute.

### III. Dharmakāya as Buddha in the Perfected State

The description of the essence of Buddhahood free from all defilements and manifesting itself in full brilliance is undertaken by the RGV after describing this same essence as encompassing all beings existing in the three

56. Thus, although these two terms (*tathāgatadhātu* and *tathāgatagarbha*) possess distinct nuances, they are often used synonymously in the RGV.

57. See RGV 40:6-41:5, where these three stages are explained as of the *same* essence, i.e. *tathāgatadhātu*. Here a quotation from the *Anūnatvāpūrnatvanirdeśa* (T. 16, p. 467b) is found, wherein *dharmakāya* is synonymous with *tathāgatadhātu*, with the emphasis on its meaning as a universal, all-pervading principle.

different states of ordinary being, bodhisattva, and Buddha. The fact that it is the same essence which penetrates through these three states is an important point for the Tathāgatagarbha Theory, and the difference in these three lies fundamentally in the degree in which the adventitious defilements have been cast off. The essence fully freed of any remnants of defilements is thus the Buddha's own mode of being, Buddhahood as such (*buddhatva*). To refer to this perfected essence the RGV also uses the term *tathāgata-dharmakāya*.

The RGV uses the term *āśraya-parivṛtti* to characterize this state, a term translated literally as "conversion of basis", but one which presents problems of interpretation.<sup>58</sup> From the point of view of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory<sup>59</sup> the "basis" (*āśraya*) can be understood as the essence which encompasses and underlies all beings (i.e., *tathāgatadhātu*), and the "conversion" (*parivṛtti*, literally, "a full revolution") involved can be interpreted to mean the full manifestation of this essence. The significant point here is that it is the *same essence*, an unchanged "basis" that remains throughout the process, the change lying mainly in the expulsion of extrinsic defilements.<sup>60</sup>

Eight categories are employed by the RGV to describe this state of Buddhahood: nature (*svabhāva*), cause (*hetu*), result (*phala*), function (*karman*), union (*yoga*), mode of being or manifestation (*vṛtti*), six categories also employed to describe the essence of the Tathāgata in general in a different section, to which are added the two categories of eternity (*nityatva*) and inconceivability (*acintyatva*).<sup>61</sup>

By "nature" is meant the twofold purity of the Buddha's state of being, the innate purity that belongs to it in essence, whereby any form of defile-

58. See *Study*, pp. 40-45. Also, Takasaki Jikidō, "Ten'e-*Āśraya-parivṛtti* to *Āśraya-parivṛtti*," JBA, XXV (1959), 89-110. Re-examining Takasaki's thesis is L. Schmithausen, *Der Nirvana-Abschnitt in der Viniścayasamgrahaṇī der Yogācārabhāṣīḥ* (Wien: Sb. Ost. Ak. Phil.-hist., 1969), pp. 90-104.

59. In contrast with the *Vijñānavāda* standpoint, which tends to employ *parāvṛtti*, in the light of its understanding of *āśraya* as *ālayavijñāna* or store-consciousness. See Takasaki, "Ten'e," and *Study*, pp. 40-45.

60. Thus, Buddhahood is essence (*tathāgatadhātu*) fully manifest, and the meaning of *āśraya parivṛtti* can be understood as such.

61. See J. Takasaki, "Description of the Ultimate Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism - by means of the Six Categories Beginning with *Svabhāva*," JIBS, IX-2 (1961), 740-731.

ment is understood as foreign to itself, and the actual purity that is the consequence of being freed from such defilements.<sup>62</sup>

“Cause” refers to the twofold wisdom that belongs to the one who has attained this stage of Buddhahood — a supramundane wisdom characterized as non-discriminative, and a “wordly” wisdom acquired on the basis of the first.<sup>63</sup> Problems of interpretation concerning this twofold wisdom arise because of the RGV’s cursory treatment, but generally supramundane wisdom refers to that by which the Buddha is able to penetrate into things as they are in a non-discriminative way that is not accessible to the common sense of ordinary men, and the “wordly” wisdom can be associated with the skilful means employed by the Tathāgata in aiding living beings, a wisdom characterized by discrimination in the sense that it is exercised in response to the particular situation and particular need of the individual beings for whom the Tathāgata acts.<sup>64</sup>

“Result” refers to the liberation undergone by the Buddha — liberation from obstructions of defilements, or lusts and passions, and liberation from obstructions of things-to-be-known or obstructions to the attainment of wisdom.<sup>65</sup>

“Function” refers to the twofold activity of the Buddha, i.e. the activity that accomplishes his own benefit (*svārthasaṃpad*) and the activity that accomplishes the benefit of others (*parārthasaṃpad*). The former means that activity whereby he is liberated from all obstructions and their remnants and thus comes to the attainment of the undefiled universal body *anāvāraṇa-dharmakāya-prāpti*), in short, the activity directed at the attainment of this state of Buddhahood. The latter means that activity that is ceaseless yet

62. There are several noteworthy studies devoted to the doctrine of the innate purity of mind in Buddhism: see Katsumata Shunkyo, *Bukkyō ni okeru Shin-shiki-setsu no Kenkyū* (A Study of the *Citta-Vijñāna* Thought in Buddhism) (Tokyo: Sankibo, 1961); Tamaki Koshiro, *Shin-hasoku no Tenkai-Tendai Jisso-kan wo chūshin to shite* (A Study on the Development of Mind in Tien Tai Thought) (Tokyo: Sankibo, 1961); Mizuno Kogen, *Pāli Bukkyō wo chūshin to shita Bukkyō no Shin-shiki-ron* (The *Citta-Vijñāna* Doctrine in Pāli Buddhist Scriptures) (Tokyo: Sankibo, 1964). D. S. Ruegg, *La Theorie du Tathāgatagarbha*, pp. 409-454, also treats this problem.

63. The treatment of the twofold-wisdom in the RGV leaves much to be desired, being too cursory and undeveloped. See RGV 80:13-14, 81:10-13.

64. For an explanation of the twofold wisdom in a Vijñanavada treatise, see the *Vijñapti-mātrāsiddhiśāstra* Ch. 9 (T. 31, pp. 50-51).

65. RGV 81:1-82:4.



also effortless, exercised on behalf of living beings by means of manifestations and teachings of two kinds of bodies of the Buddha.<sup>66</sup>

“Union” refers to the aggregate of qualities associated with the being of the Buddha: in this context the RGV describes Buddhahood as inconceivable (*acintya*), eternal (*nitya*), everlasting (*dhruva*), quiescent (*śiva*), constant (*śāśvata*), perfectly pacified (*praśānta*), all-pervading (*vyāpi*) and without discrimination (*vikalpa*, or *akalpa*).<sup>67</sup>

Qualities or virtues of Buddhahood are given in other places of the RGV as well. For example, the third chapter of the RGV is devoted to the description of the exclusive properties of the Buddha. The teaching of this chapter is based on the traditional views concerning powers and virtues and marks associated with the attainment of enlightenment. Among these are included the ten powers, four forms of intrepidity, the eighteen exclusive properties of the Buddha, as well as the thirty-two marks of the Great Person.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, in another place, the state of Buddhahood is described as in possession of Four Supreme Virtues — Perfect Purity, Absolute Selfhood, Perfect Bless, and Eternity (*subhātma-sukha-nityatva-guṇa-pāramitā*)<sup>69</sup>. These four Supreme Virtues are described as exclusive characteristics of the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*.<sup>70</sup>

Another text describes the state of Buddhahood with a different four-fold set of terms, which incidentally also appear in the description under the category of *yoga*:<sup>71</sup> *dharmakāya* is characterized as eternal (*nitya*), everlasting (*dhruva*), quiescent (*śiva*) and constant (*śāśvata*).<sup>72</sup>

66. RGV 82:6-9.

67. RGV 84:7-85:6.

68. The RGV relies on traditional teaching for its explanation of the properties of the Buddha. It appears to derive much from the *Dharanisvārarāja-sūtra* (T. 13, pp. 1-28; 409-454) as well as from the *Ratnadarika-sūtra* (T. 13, pp. 28-40; 452-473) on the properties and distinguishing marks of the Buddha. See *Keisei* pp. 639-672, 676-681.

69. RGV 34:6-7/.

70. Thus, the possession of these Supreme Virtues distinguishes the Tathagata from other beings who do not so possess them, including the *arhāt* the *pratyekabuddha*, and the *bodhisattva*. See RGV 34:4-5.

71. RGV 84:7.

72. See RGV 54:12-15, wherein these four attributes appear in the context of a quotation from the *Anunatvāpūrṇatvairdeśa* (T. 16, p. 467b).

“Mode of being”, or “manifestation” (two possible translations of *vytti*) refers to the mode of being as composed of the threefold set of bodies, a threefold distinction made on the basis of the distinction in the Buddha’s function or activity.<sup>73</sup>

The state of Buddhahood freed from all defilements is thus described from the standpoint of the above-mentioned six categories, and in addition to these six, eternity and inconceivability are included to make up a set of eight.

The eternal nature of Buddhahood is repeatedly mentioned in various context and passages, but in this context as the seventh category in a set of eight, the Buddha’s eternity is explained in terms of his being liberated from the dualistic conception of *samsāra-nirvāṇa*, which allows him to be in a state of bliss (*sukha*) even while he manifests actions in the phenomenal world for the benefit of living beings.<sup>74</sup>

The inconceivability of the state of Buddhahood is explained in terms of its unutterability (*avākyavatvāt*), because it contains the Highest Truth (*paramārthasamgrahāt*), because it surpasses the realm of mere rational investigation (*atarka-bhūmeḥ*) and because it is beyond comparison (*upama-ativṛttitaḥ*): as transcending the dualistic realm of *samsāra-nirvāṇa*, it is a realm which is inconceivable even to men of the highest attainment.<sup>75</sup>

The RGV thus abounds in terms to describe this perfected state of Buddhahood, also called *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*. All these terms are inseparable from and can be summed up in the two fundamental attributes of Wisdom and Compassion, from which spring the dynamism that is exercised in a twofold function.<sup>76</sup> It is this twofold function which becomes the basis for the division of the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* into a threefold set of bodies.

73. This is treated in the fourth section of this paper, and so we refrain from further detail here.

74. RGV 88:16-89:15.

75. RGV 89:18-90:13

76. See RGV 7: 14-15.

#### IV. *Dharmakāya* in the Context of the Threefold Buddha-body Theory

The threefold Buddha-body theory is the crystallization of a long history of speculation concerning the perfected state of the Tathāgata.<sup>77</sup> This theory posits three bodies of the Buddha, named the Essential Body (*svābhāvika-kāya*), the Reward Body (*sāmbhogika-kāya*), and the Apparitional Body (*nairmāṇika-kāya*) respectively. However, explanations concerning these three and their interrelationships appear to differ in certain Mahāyāna treatises, and problems of interpretation thus arise. One key

77. For recent significant studies on the Buddha-body theory, see Nagao Gadjin, "Busshin-ron wo megurite," *Tetsugaku-Kenkyū*, XLV-3 (1971), 1-26, or its English translation, "On the Theory of Buddha-body," *Eastern Buddhist* (New Series), (May 1974), 25-53; Tatasaki Jikidō, "Hosshin no Ichigenron (Monism of the *Dharmakāya*), in Hirakawa Akira Hakushi Kanreki Kinen Ronshū (Commemoration Volume in honour of Dr. Hirakawa Akira) entitled *Bukkyō ni Okeryō Ho no Kenkyū* (Studies on *Dharma* in Buddhism) (Tokyo: Shunju-sha, 1975), pp. 221-240; Tamura Yoshirō, *Hō to Butsu no Mondai—Busshinron wo chūshin to shite* (The Problem of *Dharma* and Buddha—Focusing on the Buddha-body theory)," *ibid.*, pp. 371-406.

The following are some earlier studies on the Buddha-body theory in Japanese, and although some stand in need of emendation in the light of recent research, their documentation and textual references can be useful for the researcher: Anesaki Masaharu, *Genshin-butsu to Hosshin-butsu* (Real or Historical Buddha and *Dharmakāya* Buddha), (Revised ed. (Tokyo: Yotoku-sha, 1956); Murakami Senshō, *Butsuda-ron* (Buddhology), Vol. II of *Bukkyō Tōitsu-ron* (Comprehensive Treatise on Buddhism) (Tokyo: Kindkodo-shoseki, 1905); Nakamura Zuiryū, "Kukyō-ichijō Hōshōron ni arawareta Busshinron (The Buddha-body theory in the RGV)," *JIBS*, I-2 (1953), 122-23; Shioda Gison, "Busshinron no Tenkai (The Development of the Buddha-body Theory)," *JIBS*, VII-2 (1959), 120-23; also the following works of the late Prof. Ue Hakuji, "Agon ni arawaretaru Butsuda-kan (Views of the Buddha in the Āgamas)," *Bukkyō Shisō Kenkyū* (Studies in Buddhist Thought) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1943), pp. 37-44; "Butsuda-kan no Hattatsu to Igi (The Development of Buddhology and its Significance)," *Bukkyō Shisō no Kiso* (Fundamentals of Buddhist Thought) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1963), pp. 211-450; "Butsuda-kan Hattatsu (The Development of Buddhology)," *Indo Tetsugaku Kenkyū* (Studies in Indian Philosophy) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1965) pp. 791-828, among others.

The following are some Western language studies devoted to the Buddha-body theory: Akanuma Chizen, "The Triple Body of the Buddha," *Eastern Buddhist*, I (1922), 1-29; Nalinaksha Dutt, "The Doctrine of Kāya," *Aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its relation to Hinayana* (London: Calcutta Oriental Series No. 23, 1930), pp. 96-128; M.P. Masson-Oursel, "Les Trois Corps du Buddha," *Journal Asiatique* (191), 581-618; Louis de la Vallée Poussin, "Studies in Buddhist Dogma: The Three bodies of a Buddha (Trikaaya)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1906) 943-77; D. T. Suzuki, "The Triple Body of the Buddha," *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 308-358.

seems to lie in the understanding of the term *dharmakāya* in the context of the three-body theory.

The RGV presents the threefold Buddha-body theory in connection with its explanation of the twofold function of the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* or perfected Buddha :<sup>78</sup>

... its function is said to be the accomplishment of its own and that of other's benefit. Now what is the accomplishment of its own benefit and that of others? That which represents the attainment of the undefiled universal body because of liberation from obstructions due to defilements and knowable things and their potential forces is called 'the accomplishment of one's own benefit'. That which comes after this and which manifests a twofold wondrous activity by means of the appearance and the teaching of the two bodies effortlessly as long as the world exists, is called 'the accomplishment of others' benefit.

Here the subject is no other than the Absolute Buddha (*Tathāgata-dharmakāya*) himself, whose activity or function is distinguished into two aspects. The activity aimed at accomplishing his own benefit is that by which he is liberated from all obstacles and their potential forces and thereby attains the undefiled universal body, becoming one with it — this function is done other than that of the attainment of Buddhahood, and is linked with the first (of the threefold) body. The activity aimed at accomplishing the benefit of others is that by which the two (other) bodies manifest themselves in various appearances and teachings, guiding living beings towards liberation from their defilements into the state of the Buddha himself. These "two (other) bodies" ostensibly point to the Reward Body depicted as preaching and expounding the *dharma* in the world of bodhisattvas, and the Apparitional Body presented as expounding the *dharma* on behalf of ordinary beings in the world.<sup>79</sup>

The distinction of three bodies in the mode of being of the Buddha is thus based on the twofold function as described. Thus, the RGV goes into a more or less detailed explanation of the three bodies under the category of "mode of being" (*vytti*) of the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*.<sup>80</sup> Thus the Essential

78. RGV 82:6-9.

79. RGV 97:13-14.

80. RGV 85:7-88:14.

Body is described as possessing five wondrous characteristics;<sup>81</sup> the Reward Body is presented both as the enjoyer as well as the manifestor of the *dharma* working for the sake of living beings, being a natural outflow of the pure compassion of the Buddha;<sup>82</sup> the Apparitional Body is described as having undergone various rebirths culminating in that of Sākya-muni wherein, having attained enlightenment, he set the *dharma*-wheel in motion, working for the sake of living beings by means of many skilful devices.<sup>83</sup>

Toward the end of the description of the Buddha in the mode of the three bodies, the RGV gives a set of three adjectives pointing to the Tathāgata as a whole but apparently with the three bodies in mind: "Being subtle, accomplishing power, and guiding the company of ordinary beings through the treacherous path, (the Buddha) is to be known respectively as the Profound, the Magnificent and the magnanimous (*gāmbhīrya, audraya, mahātmya*)."<sup>84</sup> And with this it continues, still with the three bodies in mind: "Here the first is the *dharmakāya*, and the last two are *rūpakāya*."<sup>85</sup>

The RGV thus reverts to terminology employed in the twofold-body theory, and shows how its explanation of the three-body theory derives from this former, based on a further distinction of spheres of activity which accounts for two kinds of bodies engaging in activity for others' benefit.<sup>86</sup> But this further division of a second and third body appears to be an after thought, an accommodation which does not really affect the basic structure which issues from the distinction of the twofold function. In fact, it can be said that the RGV's Buddha-body theory leans much more strongly towards the twofold rather than the threefold-body theory if one is to judge from the fundamental structure based on the distinction of function, although the author of the commentary verses employs the terminology of the threefold-body theory.<sup>87</sup>

81. These include being *asaṃskṛta* (immutable), *asaṃbhinna* (indivisible), etc.: See RGV 86:18 & ff. *Study* p. 327, note 109, points out some elements that make for a difficulty in interpretation of the RGV phrasing.

82. RGV 87:7-14.

83. RGV 87:15-88:6.

84. RGV 88:12.

85. RGV 88:13.

86. These two spheres of activity are the world of bodhisattvas (*jina-maṇḍala*) and the world of ordinary living beings (*loka*), respectively. (RGV 97:14)

87. Thus, RGV 72:1-6 makes explicit mention of the threefold Buddha-body (*buddhakāya-traya*) named *svābhāvika*, *sāmbhoga*, and *nirmāṇa*, respectively, taught as originating from a twofold *gotra* (termed *anādi-prakṛtistha* and *samudānīta uttara*) wherein the first Buddha-body is explained as issuing from the first kind of *gotra* which is innate

For example, the RGV (third) chapter on the Virtues of the Buddha (*buddhagūṇa*) gives a twofold division corresponding to the twofold function. Here the first body is called the Body of Supreme Truth (*paramārthakāya*) and is said to be the ground for the accomplishment of self-benefit, while the second body is called the Body of Worldly Emanations (*samvrtikāya*) and is said to be the ground for acts meant for the benefit of others.<sup>88</sup> Based on this division the virtues associated with enlightenment are apportioned accordingly: the ten powers, four intrepidities, and eighteen exclusive properties of the Buddha,<sup>89</sup> referred to as virtues linked to or consequent upon liberation (*viśamīyogagūṇa*) are described as characteristics of the first body while the thirty-two marks of the Great Person are taken up as properties linked to maturation (*vaipāṅkikagūṇa*).<sup>90</sup>

Up to this point the two-body division as given above seems to be the presupposed structure, but a verse which likens the exclusive properties of the Buddha to space and which mentions a twofold manifestation (of the Buddha) likened to the moon in the sky and its reflection in the water of a pond suggests the three-body structure.<sup>91</sup> A later verse refers to the first

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and timeless, and the two other bodies from the second *gotra*, as the supreme development of the former. The explanation in this section makes no reference to the twofold function. RGV 85:7-88:14 is an extended treatment of the character of the three bodies as the "mode of being" (*vytti*) or "manifestation" of the one *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*, wherein again the latter two bodies perform the same function (i.e. *parārtha-sampad*, the accomplishment of the benefit of others), though in different spheres, thus drawing a very thin line of distinction between these two. On this point, see the comment of Nagao, "Busshin-ron wo megurite," p. 26, note 28 to the same effect.

88. RGV 91:5-8.

89. For the enumeration of the ten powers, see RGV 91:20-92:2; for the four intrepidities, RGV 92:9-14; for the eighteen exclusive properties, RGV 93:4-94:7. These are all derived from traditional Buddhist teaching on the Buddha's character. See note 68, above.

90. RGV 91:7 and 91:12-13.

91. RGV 91:17-18, wherein the three elements in the illustration, namely *antarikṣa* (atmosphere or sky), *candra* the moon as visible in the sky, implied in the verse), and *ambu-candra* (the moon's reflection in water) can be interpreted as corresponding to the three bodies. RGV 95:20-96:2, however, in presenting the same illustration focuses attention on the *moon* in the sky and its *reflection* in water as the two manifestations of the Buddha, a twofold division being the central theme, where the atmosphere or sky is only an accidental element. This perhaps suggests an earlier layer of versified material prior to the development of the threefold Buddha-body theory. Such a suggestion is plausible in the light of the structure of the RGV (See Schmithausen, "Bemerkungen," pp. 123-130) as an edited compilation of

body endowed with the ten powers, four intrepidities which altogether make up thirty-two virtues as *dharmakāya*, and two kinds of bodies of visible form (*rūpakāyā*) called the Body-enjoyer-of-the-dharma (*dharmasambhogakāya*) and the Apparitional Body (*nirmānakā*): the former appears in the world of bodhisattvas, while the latter manifests itself in the world of ordinary beings, working for their benefit.<sup>92</sup> And with this we get a three-fold-body structure basically following the division based on the twofold function, wherein the first body is depicted as the ground for the accomplishment of self-benefit, and the latter two bodies in their separate spheres are described as the ground for the accomplishment of the benefit of others.

However, a problem arises upon a closer examination of the *content* and *import* of the particular virtues allotted to the first body: while it is expressly stated that these are associated with self-benefit, some of these can only be understood in connection with the activity of the Buddha aimed toward the benefit of others.<sup>93</sup> Thus there are loose ends which defy a precise and trim classification, which the author of the commentary verses of the RGV apparently was not fully able to accomplish.<sup>94</sup> While the third chapter reveals some attempt at arrangement in that elements evidently taken from earlier sources are classified in the light of a threefold-body structure, the fourth chapter dealing with the activity of the Buddha presents no such attempt, giving an account which presupposes a twofold-body structure: this is the structure presented by the *Jnānālokālamkārasūtra*, which is the main source for the material found in this RGV chapter.<sup>95</sup> It thus appears

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previously existing material. This would account for many other incongruencies in the thought-content of several sections of the final RGV text.

92. RGV 97:9-14.

93. For example, the description of the four intrepidities in RGV 92:9-14 assigned to the first body and thus to be considered as exercising the function for one's own benefit, contains elements inevitably linked with the function for others' benefit: "in preaching the Path . . . in knowing himself causes others to know . . ." etc. Likewise with the eighteen exclusive properties described 93:4-94:7, whereby these are inevitably exercised on behalf of others.

94. See the comment in note 91, above. As a "Zusammenstellung verschiedenen materiellen (collection of varied material)" (Schmithausen, "Bemerkungen," pp. 129-33) given final form and commented upon by the final author (presumably Sāramati), the RGV nevertheless reveals an over-all structural unity in the organization of chapters, the explanation of purport, etc. although as we can see, this general unity does not exclude incongruencies in detail concerning the thought-content. The observations of Takasaki and Schmithausen are guidelines in this regard, calling for more thorough analyses of the text with regard to thought-content, in addition to style, metre, vocabulary, etc.

that the author simply culled his material and organized it into this chapter without attempting to tally some details with the contents of other parts taken from other sources.

In sum, what is presented as a threefold-body theory in the RGV is basically an extension of the two-body theory of the Buddha distinguished according to the twofold function described above.

This standpoint as regards the Buddha-body theory can better be understood in the light of its contrast with the three-body theory given in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*<sup>96</sup> Here as in the RGV the terms [*svābhāvika*, *sāmbhogika*, and *nairmāṇika*] are used to refer to three bodies, and the function (*karman*) of the Buddha is likewise a crucial factor in the distinction. However, the function directed at self-benefit is attributed to the second body, and the function aimed at accomplishing the benefit of others is said to belong to the third.<sup>97</sup> To the first body (also called *dharmakāya*) no such function or activity is assigned, but is described as the ground, or basis (*āśaya*) of the other two.<sup>98</sup>

Thus in the standpoint of the MSA the first body is equated with the pure, impersonal truth-realm (*dharmadhātu*) which is the ground or basis of Buddhahood. Its realization is the function of the second body, the Enjoyer-of-the-truth, associated with Enlightenment; and thus the wisdom that makes for the accomplished Buddha, is an attribute of this second body. The third body is simply the apparition of the Buddha in various forms, foremost among which is the physical body of Gotama Śākyamuni, manifesting itself in the world for the benefit of living beings.

The RGV on the other hand attaches the function associated with Enlightenment, i.e. the function directed at self-benefit, to the first body. The second and third bodies accomplish the benefit of others within their different realms, i.e., in the world of bodhisattvas and in the world of ordinary beings, respectively.<sup>99</sup>

95. See *Keisei*, pp. 604-672.

96. The MSA appears to have preceded the RGV, as the latter quotes the former (see *Study*, pp. 40-45). The threefold Buddha-body theory makes its appearance with the MSA (Ch.9), and is thus a basic reference point concerning this topic.

97. MSA 45:18-19.

98. MSA 45:3-4; 46:2-6.

99. RGV 97:13.



A closer examination will reveal that behind these two differing explanations of the threefold Buddha-body theory lies a basic difference in the understanding of *dharmakāya* as the first body in the threefold structure. In the MSA we see an impersonal, non-acting, objective truth-realm (*dharmadhātu*) associated with this term, while in the RGV we see a personal (subjective), active entity *fused with* and indistinguishable from this impersonal aspect—the truth-realm *as realized*. The RGV *dharmakāya* as synonym for the accomplished Buddha can thus be understood as the inseparable unity of the objective truth-realm and the subjective Wisdom that grasps that truth.

The RGV framework however leaves the second body as somewhat of a problematic. It is associated with the function of accomplishing the benefit of others, i.e., specifically of those in the bodhisattva-worlds, but its very name which the RGV itself employs (*sambhoga-kāya*) means “the body which enjoys (the truth)” and thus cannot but be linked with a self-oriented function. This problematic nature of the second body is only hinted at in the RGV and is not given due development, but it recurs in other treatises, and becomes the basis for the formulation of a four-body theory which further distinguishes these two aspects within the second body.<sup>100</sup>

The third body presents no particular problems of interpretation, and there appears to be no major point of difference between the MSA and RGV on this third (apparitional) body.

For the RGV the latter two bodies are non-substantial forms,<sup>101</sup> and are mainly the outflow (*niṣyanda*) of the wisdom and Compassion of the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* or accomplished Buddha as a whole. It is this *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* which receives central attention in the RGV, and its division into three bodies is geared towards the portrayal of its activity with regard to purification enlightenment on the one hand, and to the instruction and guidance of others towards Buddhahood on the other. The *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* conceived in this way becomes an object of religious veneration, not unlike a deity acting in various wondrous ways to help beings in their plight.<sup>102</sup> Thus, this veneration of the *Tathāgatadharmakāya*

100. See above, note 31.

101. RGV 86:6.

102. The worshipful attitude towards the *Tathāgatadharmakāya* is revealed in significant passage in the fifth chapter of the RGV, wherein the “Lord Amitayus, endowed with infinite light” (RGV 119:7) is invoked. Here *Amitayus* is presented as a particularized name of *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*, the fully-accomplished Buddha also hailed and revered in the introductory section of the treatise (RGV 7:9-12).

as a personal absolute is seen to be another underlying theme of the RGV among others, and the religious import of the treatise likewise comes to our attention in addition to its philosophical significance.

## V. Concluding Reflections :

### *The Continuing Problematic of the Buddhist Absolute*

Other than *dharmakāya*, there are many terms which could be investigated in order to shed better light on the conception(s) of the Buddhist Absolute. But this one term provides us with a good index for such purposes. We have limited the present investigation mainly to one Mahāyāna treatise, but there are several others which call for further investigation in order to broaden and deepen the dimensions of the picture: this remains a task for the future.<sup>103</sup>

Our investigation has led us to note two fundamental senses in which *dharmakāya* can be understood. There is first of all what can be called the *inclusive* sense whereby the term is used to refer to the universal principle that grounds the unity of living beings on the one hand, and the perfected Buddha on the other. This is the sense synonymous with *tathāgatadhātu*, the essence which manifests itself in the three levels of ordinary being, bodhisattva, and Buddha: it is the same essence that permeates throughout these three levels, the difference among these three being the degree in which defilements which cover it have been expelled. From the standpoint of this essence, ordinary beings are no different from Buddha.

103. Vijnānavada treatises including the MSA, the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, the *Vijñaptimātratāśādhishāstra*, etc., deserve investigation and re-examination on this point. The problematic treatise *Fo Xing Lun (Bussho-ron)* which is heavily dependent on the RGV and was "translated" into Chinese by Paramartha (see Hattori Masaaki, "Bussho-ron no Ichi-kosatsu," *Bukkyō-shi Gaku* IV, 3-4 [1955], 160-174) and whose influence in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism cannot be gainsaid, attempts to integrate elements of *Vijñānavada* into the Tathāgatagarbha Theory, and deserves re-examination. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and likewise the still problematic *Da Cheng Qi Xin Lun (Daijō-kishin-ron)* (whose origins and authorship remain unclear) also noted for combining Tathāgatagarbha and Vijnānavada elements, cannot be overlooked. On the Madhyamika side, the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and Haribhadra's commentary on this, together with the latter's other works, also deserve further investigation, among others. Developments on the Buddha-body theory in *Esoteric* Buddhism especially in connection with *Mahāvairocana Buddha* also fall under this area of research. Chinese and Japanese developments, of course, present a vast area, research on these would open the field to an enormously wider range.

A quotation from the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśa* found in the RGV illustrates this sense of *dharmakāya*.<sup>104</sup>

O Śāriputra, this universal body (*dharmakāya*) covered by a bouddless sheath of defilements, carried by the flow of the stream of phenomenal life (*samsāra-srotasā*) and moving to and fro between death and birth in the flow of the beginningless stream of phenomenal life is called 'the realm of (ordinary) living beings' (*sattvadhatu*)

This same universal body, O Śāriputra, being averse to the suffering in the stream of phenomenal life, and having been freed from all objects of desire, engaging in the practice that leads to enlightenment by means of the ten Supreme Virtues which include and represent all of the eighty-four thousand groups of doctrines, is called '*bodhisattva*.'

Further, this very same universal body, Śāriputra, released from all the sheaths of defilements, having transcended all suffering, having expelled all stains of subsequent defilements, and being pure, perfectly pure, abiding in the Absolute Truth which is the highest point of purity (*parama-parisuddha-dharmatayam sthitah*) . . . is called the *Tathāgata*, *Arhat*, the Perfectly Enlightened One.

In other words, the emphasis is on the *same universal body* found in these three different stages or levels. Thus, "the realm of living beings is no different from the universal body, for the realm of living beings is no other than the universal body, and the universal body is no other than the realm of living beings. These are non-dual in meaning, and are different merely in name."<sup>105</sup>

*Dharmakāya* in this sense then is a monistic principle that embraces all (living) beings, an impersonal absolute equated with the truth-realm (*dharmadhātu*) that is the ground of all.<sup>106</sup> The complete attainment and

104. RGV 40:16-41:15. See T. 16, p. 467b.

105. RGV 41:15-17. See T. 16, p. 467b.

106. One must note, however, that the Indian world-view considered the "universe of beings" in terms of the six spheres of living beings including the hell-dweller, ghost, beast, demon, man, and heavenly being. The Buddhist view would include the *arhat*, the *pratyekabuddha*, the *bodhisattva*, and the *Buddha* to make ten spheres. These are the beings pervaded by the "universal presence" of the *tathāgatadhātu* or *dharmakāya*. The question of whether this presence is also in plants and non-living beings came to be raised in China, as in Ji Zang's *Da Cheng Xuan Lun* (T. 45, pp. 15-76), Fa Zang's *Hug Yan Jing Tan Xuan Ji* (T. 35, pp. 107-491), etc., becoming a lively topic in the a lively topic in the time of Zhan Ran (711-782)

realization of this truth-realm is the ultimate aim of all living beings, and one who has come to such an attainment is called the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

The second fundamental meaning of *dharmakāya* refers to such a one having come to a state of attainment—an *exclusive* sense of the term proper to the Buddha alone. Thus, *dharmakāya* is understood as a synonym for Tathāgata, Arhat, Perfectly-Enlightened One, who has attained liberation from all kinds of defilements and their potential forces, has fully realized the absolute truth-realm and thus abides in it, and who is the possessor of the four Supreme Virtues of Purity, Unity, Bliss, and Eternity (*śubhātma-sukhanityatva-guṇapāramitā*).

It is in the context of this exclusive sense that the RGV notes the distinction between *dharmakāya* and other beings :

Thus, in these three bodies made of mind, that is, of the Arhats, Pratyeka-buddhas, and Bodhisattvas, there exist no Supreme Virtues of Purity, Unity, Bliss, and Eternity. . . only the *Tathāgata-dharmakāya* is possessed of Supreme Eternity, Supreme Unity, Supreme Bliss, Supreme Purity.<sup>107</sup>

Here *dharmakāya* as the appellation for the perfectly attained state of Buddhahood, is synonymous with *buddhatva*, the perfected essence of enlightenment itself, now fully manifest and fully active, with the clouds of defilements which covered it having been removed. Here the pure truth-realm has been attained, grasped by a subject who is thus the possessor of Wisdom (*jñāna*), and who out of his compassion for all beings acts in manifold and marvellous ways in order to help them in their plight in the phenomenal world characterized by suffering.

With this, *dharmakāya* comes to be understood as a Personal Absolute which thus becomes an object of religious veneration and supplication. Adoration hymns usually found prefacing various Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises present such an attitude of religious veneration and supplication with the Buddha, the Perfectly-Enlightened who comes to the succour of all living beings, as the terminal or object.

107. RGV 34:4-6. This a quotation from the *Srimaladevi-simhanada-sutra* (T. 12, pp. 217-223). See T. 12, p. 222a.

This distinction of the twofold sense of *dharmakāya*, i.e. as an impersonal absolute signifying the truth-realm underlying the existence of all beings, and as the Personal Absolute who, having become one with this truth-realm, is the possessor of Wisdom and Compassion and who constantly comes to the aid of all beings, can give one a better vantage-point in attempting to follow the argumentation and philosophico-religious disputation among Buddhist masters in China and Japan who make frequent reference to *dharmakāya*. The equivocal nature of this term is what leads to mutual misunderstanding, and polarization of position.<sup>108</sup>

It is this equivocation which likewise appears to be behind the two explanatory versions of the threefold Buddha-body theory as seen above, reflected in the respective positions of the MSA and the RGV. The former understands *dharmakāya* in the first-mentioned sense as the impersonal truth-realm, which is linked with the first of the three bodies, also called *svābhāvika-kāya*, and which grounds the other two in their respective functions. The latter on the other hand takes and gives central importance to the second sense as Personal Absolute representing the union or fusion of truth-realm and Possessor (or Subject) of that truth-realm, in short the fully enlightened Buddha having become one with the pure *dharmadhātu*, and distinguishes three bodies in this Personal Absolute according to the distinction of a twofold function. The first of the three Buddha-bodies in this framework represents the essence (*svabhāva*) of this Personal Absolute, which is the realization of Enlightenment and purification from all defilements, while the other two bodies are explained as outflows (*niṣyanda*) of the Compassion of this Personal Absolute, or *Tathāgata-dharmakāya*, functioning on behalf of bodhisattvas and ordinary being, respectively.

The continuing problematic of the Buddhist Absolute can be in part accounted for by the presence of this twofold sense of *dharmakāya*. For the religious attitude or disposition of the Buddhist follower, as well as the religious practice deemed necessary for the attainment of what is considered to be the ultimate goal, will differ depending on which of the two senses is given emphasis. Or the same Buddhist follower may find himself stressing the one or the other element at different times, thus accounting for the

108. Thus, arguments as to whether to regard *Vairocana Buddha* or *Amitabha Buddha* as *dharmakāya* or as *sambhogakāya*, etc., among later followers in China and Japan, revolve around the understanding of *dharmakāya* and the particular theoretical framework held concerning the Buddha-body.

possibility of a plurality of religious attitudes and standpoints within Buddhism itself — a plurality which need not necessarily imply mutual negation or contradiction.<sup>109</sup>

Thus, giving priority to the first sense of the Absolute as impersonal truth realm, for instance, would imply a non-theistic, matter-of-fact, yet nonetheless religious attitude that seeks to penetrate into the meaning of existence, setting as guides basic Buddhist doctrines as the Fourfold Truth, the Eightfold Path, the Truth of Dependent Origination, the Truth of the Void, etc. Such is the religious stance of one who can be termed a “seeker-after-Enlightenment,” or *bodhisattva*, who in the course of his search guided by the teachings (*dharmā*) of the Enlightened Śākyamuni, discovers that he is one with all living beings, and is thus moved to compassion, partaking in their suffering lot, putting himself at the service of beings, exerting fully on their behalf. The actual history of Buddhism abounds in the examples of persons who have realized this *bodhisattva* ideal in their lives.

To give priority to the second sense of the Absolute, i.e. as Personal, on the other hand, would imply the entry of another element in the religious stance—that of a worshipful piety and veneration that looks upon the Wise and Compassionate Buddha that transcends history, acting in various marvellous ways and assuming many forms for the succour of beings throughout all ages. The entry of this element, however, does not mean the exclusion nor the loss of esteem for the *bodhisattva* ideal as outlined above, as many who have actually lived the *bodhisattva* ideal have manifested this worshipful attitude as well. The names for the object of worshipful veneration in the history of Buddhism have varied—different Buddhas have been set up by different groups of followers throughout the ages: the Buddha Amitābha, Vairocana, Buddha etc. But the common factor is that the object of veneration is an Enlightened One who has become one with the truth of all existence and who acts for all beings replete with Wisdom and Compassion.

The question of the Buddhist Absolute remains an ongoing one, presenting tasks for further research not only in the history of Buddhist thought

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109. The co-existence (and complementarity) of truth-centred faith and person-centred worship, for example, can be found throughout the various stages of Buddhist history. See Tamura, “Nin-honzon to Ho-honzon” (above, note 12) for an article on this point.

but in the history and phenomenology of religion as well. Likewise, the interreligious dialogue going on in the contemporary context cannot but consider this question with increasing interest and concern. Comparative studies with notions of the Absolute in Western philosophy, or in Chinese, or Indian philosophy, etc., can become a source of light for contemporary man who, standing subject to the influence of various cultures, cannot help but find himself going back to the basic question of the meaning of his existence.