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# Is Amitābha a Saṃbhogakāya?

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars following the ancient Chinese masters believe that Amitābha is a saṃbhogakāya. However, after an analysis, Amitābha should be considered as a nirmāṇakāya, not as a saṃbhogakāya, on three grounds. First, as Śākyamuni did, Amitābha also made vows to liberate beings in his land, and he created a land and attained Buddhahood there. Śākyamuni is considered a nirmāṇakāya, so is Amitābha. Second, only the nirmāṇakāya, not the saṃbhogakāya, makes a display of parinirvāṇa, but Amitābha attains parinirvāṇa. Third, the saṃbhogakāya brings only bodhisattvas to maturity, but the nirmāṇakāya brings to maturity the śrāvakas as well as bodhisattvas in their initial stage.

**Keywords:** Amitābha, saṃbhogakāya, nirmāṇakāya, Śākyamuni

Japanese scholars such as Takeuchi, following Chinese masters such as Daochuo<sup>2</sup>, assert that Amitābha is a saṃbhogakāya.<sup>3</sup> Daochuo is perhaps the first person to explicitly make such an assertion in writing.<sup>4</sup> In his *Anleji*<sup>5</sup> Daochuo states, "Amitābha in the present is a saṃbhogakāya and the paradise land adorned with jewels is a Reward Land."<sup>6</sup> However, in the same text some questions were raised: "The saṃbhogakāya is eternal. Why does the *Sūtra on Avalokiteśvara's Prediction* state that after the parinirvāṇa of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva would become a

Buddha?" Daochuo replies: "This is the saṃbhogakāya that manifests birth and death, it is not that it really attains nirvāṇa. The sūtra also states that after the parinirvāṇa of Amitābha, those sentient beings who have good roots in deep faith are still able to see the Buddha. This is a testimony."<sup>7</sup> However, Daochuo's argument is weak, as David Chappell has pointed out. Nevertheless, it has exercised a tremendous influence on Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>8</sup>

Before Daochuo, Amitābha was considered as a nirmāṇakāya according to his *Anleji*. "According to ancient tradition, Amitābha is considered as a nirmāṇakāya by all and his Buddha land is also a land for a nirmāṇakāya."<sup>9</sup> This is confirmed by David Chappell's analysis of Amitābha in the writings of Sengzhao,<sup>10</sup> Jingying Huiyuan<sup>11</sup> and Tiantai Zhiyi.<sup>12</sup> So Amitābha, just as Śākyamuni, should be considered as a nirmāṇakāya and not as a saṃbhogakāya.

Before going into detailed discussion, we must first clarify the definition of the three kāyas. According to the concept of "trikāya" as explained in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, all three "kāyas" are equal and eternal. "On account of their basis,<sup>13</sup> mind<sup>14</sup> and karma, the three kāyas are equal. With regard to their essence,<sup>15</sup> non-interruption and continuity, the three kāyas are eternal." The commentary on the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* explains, "By the three kinds of kāyas, all Buddhas are completely equal. On account of their basis, all Buddhas are equal with regard to svabhāvakāya because the dharmadhātu is the same. On account of their mind, all Buddhas are equal with regard to the saṃbhogakāya because the Buddha mind is the same. On account of their karma, all Buddhas are equal with regard to the nirmāṇakāya because the Buddha's deeds are the same. Again, all Buddhas are eternal with regard to the svabhāvakāya because the svabhāva is eternal and without defilement. All Buddhas are eternal with regard to the saṃbhogakāya because they teach the Dharma without interruption. All Buddhas are eternal with regard to the nirmāṇakāya because though it disappears from here it reappears there."<sup>16</sup>

The three kāyas manifested by Buddhas as defined above are both equal and eternal, but the nirmāṇakāya disappears from one place and reappears in another place in order to liberate sentient beings. Such disappearance and reappearance are the parinirvāṇa and the birth of a nirmāṇakāya, which are the activities of a Buddha. According to the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, the nirmāṇakāya performs eight acts in the world in order to benefit sentient beings. They include descending from

Tuṣṭita heaven, being born, indulging in desire, leaving home, practicing various asceticisms, attaining great enlightenment, turning the wheel of Dharma, and entering parinirvāṇa.<sup>17</sup> However, there is no such things concerning the concept of the "saṃbhogakāya". Amitābha in accordance with this definition should be considered as a nirmāṇakāya on the following three grounds.

First, according to the *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, when Amitābha was a bhikṣu named Dharmākara, he made twenty-four or forty-eight vows to become a Buddha before Lokeśvararāja Tathāgata.<sup>18</sup> He also vowed to have his Buddha land of such purity that it would be free from all evils such as those found in our Sahā world. Accordingly, Dharmākara attained enlightenment and became Amitābha Buddha in his Pure Land, Sukhāvātī. Śākyamuni, in the same way, also became a Buddha in this Sahā world after he made vows to liberate suffering sentient beings in front of the ancient Buddha Śākyamuni in the first asaṃkhyeya kalpa.<sup>19</sup> It is also said in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* that Śākyamuni vowed to liberate those in the defiled world through the Dharma. He did not appear in the world for enjoying happiness and wealth.<sup>20</sup> If Śākyamuni is regarded as a nirmāṇakāya, then in the same way, Amitābha should also be regarded as a nirmāṇakāya because they both became Buddhas in their respective Buddha lands in accordance with their vows for the sake of specific living beings.

How does one explain that Amitābha enjoys a limitless life span and immeasurable light in his Sukhāvātī due to his past merit? The answer to this question is that Amitābha's qualities of a limitless life span and immeasurable light are adaptations to accord with and liberate particular living beings in Sukhāvātī who also enjoy long life spans. The situation is similar to Śākyamuni, who made a display of having lived for only eighty years in order to suit the expectations of sentient beings in our *Sāha* world. In fact, he could have enjoyed an immeasurable life span as explained in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*.<sup>21</sup> The *Avataṃsaka* states: "There are Buddhas appearing in (different) worlds making a display of rūpakāyas which pervade all over the cosmos,<sup>22</sup> some have short life spans while others live for limitless kalpas."<sup>23</sup> The author of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* also explains this point clearly: "Thus the life spans of all Buddhas are, in fact, immeasurable, but they make displays of either short or long life spans (in accordance with the beings of that particular world) in order to liberate them."<sup>24</sup>

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* makes the same point, "All Buddhas and Tathāgatas are equal in merit, but they make displays of having different Buddha lands in order to teach and liberate sentient beings."

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* further states, "Ānanda, all Buddhas are the same so far as the perfections of the Buddha-qualities are concerned. These include: their forms, colours, radiance, bodies, marks, nobility, morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation, gnosis, vision of liberation, strengths, fearlessness, special Buddha-qualities, great love, great compassion, helpful intentions, attitudes, practices, paths, the length of lives, teaching of the Dharma, development and liberation of living beings, and purification of Buddha lands. Therefore, they are all called Samyaksambuddhas, Tathāgatas, and Buddhas."<sup>25</sup> So Amitābha should be considered as a *nirmāṇakāya* since he makes a display of long life in *Sukhāvātī*.

Secondly, in all three Chinese translations of the *Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*,<sup>26</sup> it is said that once Amitābha attains *parinirvāṇa*, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara will become a Buddha, the lord of *Sukhāvātī*, who in turn will teach there. "After the *parinirvāṇa* of Amitābha, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara<sup>27</sup> will attain Buddhahood and will be the lord teaching the Dharma. He will liberate individuals of the world as well as gods of the eight directions, above and below, by facilitating the *nirvāṇa* of all beings. His merits will be the same as Amitābha."<sup>28</sup>

There is no *parinirvāṇa* with regard to the *saṃbhogakāya* as it is eternal. The *nirmāṇakāya*, though eternal, makes a display of birth, enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa* as Śākyamuni Buddha did. It follows that Amitābha cannot be regarded as a *saṃbhogakāya*, but a *nirmāṇakāya* for he also attains *parinirvāṇa* as defined above.

Thirdly, according to the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, the *saṃbhogakāya* enjoys the Dharma to its fullest realization by sharing it only with the assembly of great bodhisattvas.<sup>29</sup>

The commentary on the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* explains it thus: "All Buddhas have three bodies, the first is the *svabhāvakāya* and its characteristic is transformation. The second is the *saṃbhogakāya* which shares the food of Dharma with the great assembly. The third is the

nirmāṇakāya which works for the benefit of beings through its manifestations. It should be noted that the svabhāvakāya is the support of both the saṃbhogakāya and the nirmāṇakāya."<sup>30</sup>

In his *Mahāyānasamgrahabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu explains this point further by saying that the saṃbhogakāya serves only to bring bodhisattvas to maturity. "(The statement) 'Dharmakāya is the support for various saṃbhogakāyas' means that the saṃbhogakāyas are supported by the dharmakāya. Why must they be thus supported? It is because they bring all bodhisattvas to maturity. Without (the help of) such saṃbhogakāyas, bodhisattvas who have entered the first stage<sup>31</sup> would not come to maturity. (The statement) 'it is the support for the various nirmāṇakāyas' illustrates that these nirmāṇakāyas are supported by the dharmakāya. Why must they be thus supported? It is because they generally bring all śrāvakas to maturity. Without the help of these nirmāṇakāyas, śrāvakas of little faith and meagre understanding would not come to maturity. The term 'generally' should be understood to imply the inclusion of bodhisattvas who are in the stages of (initial) understanding and practice."<sup>32</sup> From these explanations, it is clear that the saṃbhogakāya shares the pure Dharma with great bodhisattvas, bringing only bodhisattvas to maturity. The nirmāṇakāya brings to maturity the śrāvakas as well as bodhisattvas in their initial stage. Amitābha however, teaches various kinds of beings aside from bodhisattvas and arhats. The larger *Sukhāvativyūhasūtra* explains:

When Amitābha delivers a sūtra to bodhisattvas and arhats who assemble in the teaching hall, immeasurable bodhisattvas, arhats, gods, people and other beings fly to where Amitābha is, sit down and listen to the sūtra after paying their respects (to Amitābha). ... After Amitābha has proclaimed the sūtra to bodhisattvas and arhats, amongst the gods and people, those who have not attained the path attain it, those who have not attained śrotāpanna attain it... sakṛdāgāmin, ... anāgamin, ... arhat, and those who have not attained the irreversible<sup>33</sup> stage of the bodhisattva career attain it.<sup>34</sup>

Since Amitābha teaches various kinds of beings in his Sukhāvati in addition to great bodhisattvas, Amitābha cannot be regarded as a saṃbhogakāya. More intuitively he is to be regarded as a nirmāṇakāya as he attained Buddhahood for the sake of particular beings possessing a long life span and special powers. As quoted above, Vasubandhu explains that it is the nirmāṇakāya which brings to maturity the śrāvakas as well as bodhisattvas. Śākyamuni and Amitābha attained enlightenment in their respective Buddha lands of Sahā and Sukhāvati in accordance with their vows. Belonging to

the same category, they assumed different *nirmāṇakāyas* in order to teach and liberate particular beings in their respective Buddha lands. Śākyamuni lived for only eighty years because the life span of people in the *Sahā* world is around a hundred years while Amitābha has a long life because the beings in the *Sukhāvātī* generally have long lives. In the end the two Buddhas attain *parinirvāṇa* in their Buddha lands after they have completed their Buddha activities. Since Śākyamuni is considered a *nirmāṇakāya*, Amitābha must also be treated in the same way.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some Chinese characters and Romanized Sanskrit terms in this paper. If your computer does not support these characters, please download the relevant fonts and install them first. To download GBK Chinese font to browse with IE, please click [here](#). To download Sanskrit font to browse with IE, please click [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> 道绰, 562-645 CE.

<sup>3</sup> Takeuchi Shiyokou ("Buddhakan no henshen". In Akira Hirakawa, ed., *Daijō Bukkyō*, Vol. I, Tokyo: Shunjusha. 1983), 168-169.

<sup>4</sup> Mochizuki Shinkō thinks that according to master Tanluan (曇鸞, 488-554) Amitābha was indeed a *sambhogkāya*. However, Tanluan never expressed this idea in his writings. See David Chappell ("Chinese Buddhist Interpretations of the Pure Lands", in Michael Saso and David W. Chappell ed., *Buddhist and Taoist Studies I*, Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii, 1977), 36.

<sup>5</sup> 安乐集

<sup>6</sup> T47, 5c. 《安乐集》：现在弥陀是报佛，极乐宝庄严国是报土。

<sup>7</sup> T47, 5c-6a. 问曰：“如来报身常住，云何《观音授记经》云‘阿弥陀佛入涅槃后，观世音菩萨次补佛处’也？”答曰：“此是报身，示现隐没相，非灭度也。彼经云，阿弥陀佛入涅槃后，复有深厚善根众生还见如故，即其证也。”

<sup>8</sup> David Chappell, *op. cit.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> T47, 5c14. “然古旧相传，皆云：阿弥陀佛是化身，土是化土。”

<sup>10</sup> 僧肇, 375-414 CE.

<sup>11</sup> 净影慧远, 523-592 CE.

<sup>12</sup> 智顓, 538-597CE, David Chappell, *op. cit.*, 26-36.

<sup>13</sup> 依, *āśraya*.

<sup>14</sup> 心, *āśaya*.

<sup>15</sup> 自性, *svabhāva*.

<sup>16</sup> T31, 606c, line 12-21.

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<sup>17</sup> T31, 129c. 149a.

<sup>18</sup> The Chinese translations of T12, No.361 and No.362 list twenty-four vows, T12, No.363 lists thirty-six, while T12, No.360, No.364, the Sanskrit as well as the Tibetan versions describe forty-eight. However, the Chinese Buddhists in general believe in the forty-eight vows in their daily practice.

<sup>19</sup> According to the *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra*, there are two Śākyamuni Buddhas. The present Śākyamuni Buddha, as a bodhisattva, made his vows eons ago to become a Buddha exactly the same as the ancient Śākyamuni Buddha who became a Buddha when the life span of people was around a hundred years. See T27, 891b-892a.

<sup>20</sup> T25, 313b. 释迦文佛本誓：“我出恶世，欲以道法度脱众生，不为富贵世乐故出。”

<sup>21</sup> In the Chapter on the Life Span of the Tathāgata in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, it is said that the life span of the Śākyamuni is in fact immeasurable.

<sup>22</sup> dharmadhātu

<sup>23</sup> T9, 411c. “所谓：有佛兴世，色身示现，遍满法界，或有短寿，或无量劫。”

<sup>24</sup> T25, 312a-b. “以是故知，诸佛寿命，实皆无量，为度人故，现有长短。”

<sup>25</sup> T14, 554a. “阿难：诸佛色身、威相、种性、戒、定、智慧、解脱、解脱知见、力、无所畏、不共之法、大慈、大悲、威仪所行、及其寿命、说法教化、成就众生、净佛国土，具诸佛法，悉皆同等，是故名为‘三藐三佛陀’，名为‘多陀阿伽度’，名为‘佛陀’。”

<sup>26</sup> T12, No.361, No.362 and No.364.

<sup>27</sup> The text uses a term 'Alougen' which is an early translation of the name Avalokiteśvara. See William Edward Soothill, Lewis Hodous and Rev. Shik Sheng-kang, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 1989, 399a.

<sup>28</sup> T12, 291a, line 3 – 7. The passages quoted in T12, No.361 and T12, No.362 are the same, but T12, No.364 is different. "After the parinirvāṇa of Amitābha, bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara will attain Buddhahood and take over the role of teaching to liberate humans as well as gods of the ten directions of the world by establishing them all in nirvāṇa." T12, 336b line 18-21. The *Karuṇapuṇḍarīkasūtra* also mentions the same idea of the parinirvāṇa of Amitābha Buddha, T3, 186a.

<sup>29</sup> T31, 606a-c.

<sup>30</sup> T31, 606b, line 9-12.

<sup>31</sup> 地, bhūmi.



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<sup>32</sup> T31, 372b, line 28 to 372c, line 6. There are three Chinese translations of the *Mahāyānasamgrahabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu: T31, No.1595 translated by Paramārtha in 563 CE; No.1596 translated by Dharmagupta in 590-616 CE, and No.1597 translated by Xuanzang in 647-649 CE. The English translation with a few changes is adopted from Paul Griffiths, and Noriaki Hakamaya, *The Realm of Awakening: A Translation and Study of the Tenth Chapter of Asaṅga's Mahāyānasamgraha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 113-114.

<sup>33</sup> 不退转, Avaivarta.

<sup>34</sup> T12, 307a-b. This is a long passage describing how after Amitābha proclaimed the sūtra, the listeners attained various stages of attainments.