

**Early Buddhist *Dhammakāya*:  
Its Philosophical and Soteriological Significance**

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## Abstract

This work proposes a different interpretation of the early Buddhist term *dhammakāya* (Skt. *dharmakāya*) which has been long understood, within the academic arena, to owe its philosophical import only to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In the introductory chapter, this study reviews scholarly interpretations of the term *dhammakāya* as it is used in early Buddhist texts and locates the problems therein. It observes that the mainstream scholarly interpretation of the Pali *dhammakāya* involves an oversimplification of the canonical passages and the employment of incomplete data. The problems are related mainly to possible interpretations of the term's two components - *dhamma* and *kāya* - as well as of the compound *dhammakāya* itself. Some scholarly use of Chinese *Āgama* references to supplement academic understanding of the early Buddhist *dhammakāya* involves similar problems. Besides, many references to *dharmakāya* found in the Chinese *Āgamas* are late and perhaps should not be taken as representing the term's meaning in early Buddhism. This work, thus, undertakes a close examination of relevant aspects of the Pali terms *dhamma*, *kāya*, and *dhammakāya* in the second, the third, and the fourth chapters respectively. Occasionally, it discusses also references from the Chinese *Āgamas* and other early Buddhist sources where they are relevant. The methodologies employed are those of textual analysis and comparative study of texts from different sources. The result appears to contradict mainstream scholarly interpretations of the early Buddhist *dhammakāya*,

especially that in the Pali canon. It suggests that the interpretation of the term, in the early Buddhist usage, in an exclusive sense of ‘teachings collected together’ or ‘collection of teaching’ is insufficient or misleading and that a more appropriate interpretation is a ‘body of enlightening qualities’ from which the teachings originate. That being the case, *dhammakāya* appears to be the essence of enlightenment attained by early Buddhist nobles of all types and levels.

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## Abbreviations

### General Abbreviations

BJ	Sinhalese <i>Buddhajayanī</i> version of the Pali <i>Tipiṭaka</i>
CS	Burmese <i>Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā</i> version of the Pali <i>Tipiṭaka</i>
lit.	literally
P.	Pali
PTS	The Pali Text Society
PTSD	Pali-English Dictionary of the Pali Text Society
Skt.	Sanskrit
SR	Thai <i>Syamraṭṭha</i> version of the Pali <i>Tipiṭaka</i>
T.	Chinese <i>Tripitaka</i> (Taisho edition)

### Abbreviations of texts

A	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
Abhdhp	<i>Abhidhānappadīpikā</i>
AbhAv	<i>Abhidhammāvatāra</i> (CS version)
AbhK	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam</i>
Ap	<i>Apadāna</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
DA	<i>Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā</i>
DAnT	<i>Dīghanikāya-abhinavaṭṭikā</i>
DhA	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DhsA	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā</i>
DT	<i>Dīghanikāya-ṭṭikā</i>
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
ItA	<i>Itivuttaka-aṭṭhakathā</i>
J	<i>Jātaka</i>
JA	<i>Jātaka-aṭṭhakathā</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
MA	<i>Majjhimanikāya-aṭṭhakathā</i>

Miln	<i>Milindapañho</i>
MT	<i>Majjhimanikāya-ṭīkā</i>
Nd1	<i>Mahāniddesa</i>
NdA	<i>Niddesa-aṭṭhakathā</i>
NettA	<i>Netti-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Pp	<i>Puggapaññatti</i>
PPA	<i>Pañca-pakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā</i>
PPT	<i>Pañca-pakaraṇa-ṭīkā</i>
Ps	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
S	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
SnA	<i>Suttanipāta-aṭṭhakathā</i>
SrD	<i>Sāratthadīpanī</i>
Th	<i>Theragāthā-Therīgāthā</i>
ThrA	<i>Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
ThīA	<i>Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Vbh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>
VinA	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka-aṭṭhakathā</i>
VjB	<i>Vinayabuddhi-ṭīkā</i> (CS version)
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
Ym	<i>Yamaka</i>

## Referencing of Primary Resources

### Referencing of the Pali Texts

1. The main source of Pali *Tipiṭaka* is the version of the Pali Text Society (PTS).
2. The referencing consists of the abbreviation of the text title (in ‘Abbreviations’), volume, and page number(s) respectively. All are punctuated with a period. For example, ‘D.III.84’ refers to *Dīghanikāya*, volume 3, page 84 of the PTS version.
3. In case the text contains only one volume, the volume number is not indicated. For example, ‘Sn.24’ refers to the *Sutta-nipāta* page 24.
4. Additional sources are the Pali *Tipiṭaka* of the *Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā* (CS), *Syāmaratṭha* (SR), and *Buddhajayantī* (BJ) versions. The style of referencing of these texts follows that of the PTS version, with the abbreviation of the version of text added at the end. For example, ‘S.V.112 (CS)’ refers to *Samyutta-nikāya*, volume 5, page 112 of the *Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyanā* version.

### Referencing of the Chinese *Āgamas*

1. The main source is the Taisho edition.
2. The reference number includes the letter ‘T’ (*Taisho Tripiṭaka*) followed by the sequential number of the *sūtra*, volume number, page number and section(s) respectively. All elements are punctuated with a period. For example, ‘T.125.I.549c’ refers to Chinese *Tripiṭaka* (Taisho edition), *sūtra* 125, volume 1, page 549, section c. (Each page contains three sections: a, b, and c.)