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“Manomaya kāya“: meanings and uses in the Pāli Canon

Abstract

Manomaya kāya is one of the few and not entirely explicit expressions to be found in the Pāli Canon. This notion of a “mind-produced body” is directly related, on the one hand, to the question of the paranormal psychic powers of the Buddha and his great disciples, and, on the other, to that of the multiplicity of planes of existence, two areas so particular that they cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by lapidary interpretations. The aim of this article is to present the meanings of *manomaya kāya* and the uses made of it in the Pāli Canon; a study limited to this corpus, which nevertheless makes it possible to rule out a few erroneous interpretations of these meanings and uses.

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Introduction

The Canon of Theravāda Buddhism, the *Tipiṭaka Pāli*, contains some rare and not very self-explanatory terms or expressions. From antiquity to our modern times, authors and translators who did not make the effort to place themselves in the cultural and doctrinal context that was that of the Buddha could not and cannot perceive the meaning then given to these terms. This form of ignorance has allowed, and continues to allow, the exploitation of these words for the benefit of erroneous beliefs.

Manomaya kāya is one of these expressions. Moreover, it is directly related, on the one hand, to the question of the paranormal psychic powers of the Buddha and his great disciples, and, on the other hand, to the question of the multiplicity of planes of existence: two areas so specific in the eyes of Western translators and commentators that they justify, in our opinion, not being satisfied with evasive interpretations.

As its title specifies, the purpose of our article is to present the meanings of *manomaya kāya* and the uses to which it is put in the Pāli Canon; an investigation that helps to rule out a few erroneous interpretations of these meanings and uses.

The present work is therefore deliberately limited: it does not deal – except at the margins – with what the other major currents of Buddhism have to say about *manomaya kāya*; such a work would be on a completely different scale, given the numerous and profound divergences on this point, as on many others, between these currents and the most ancient tradition of Buddhism.

1. The expression *manomaya kāya*

1.1. The meaning

The adjective *manomaya* is made up of the words *mano* and *maya*. The adjective *maya* means “made of”, “consisting of”; regarding its use in *manomaya*, the ancient *Commentaries* relate it to *nibbatti*, “production”, “origin” (and, figuratively, “rebirth”). The noun *mano* means “thought”,

“mind”; it represents the intellectual functioning of consciousness¹. The whole thing therefore has the meaning of “mind-produced”.

This adjective is generally associated with *kāya*, “the body”: therefore what we are talking about here is a “mind-produced body”; it is on this strange expression that we will focus our questions.

1.2. A rare expression

The expression appears only about forty times in the *Tipiṭaka* (several of these occurrences also appear in repetitions of the same text).

The terms manomaya kāya (all declensions)

<i>Tipiṭaka</i>	
<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>	1
<i>Suttā-piṭaka</i>	8
<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	3
<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	4
<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>	17
<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>	9
<i>Khuddhaka-nikāya</i>	0
<i>Abhidhamma-piṭaka</i>	0

Source: *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0 (Vipassana Research Institute)*

2. A psychic power

The ability to “produce a body by mind” is not supernatural insofar as it is within the reach of the human being; however, it is neither general, easy nor spontaneous, insofar as its acquisition requires the mastery of a deep meditative practice.

2.1. The paranormal powers

The canonical texts teach us that great meditators, and a fortiori buddhas, can access six paranormal powers and modes of knowledge (*abhiññā*, “the elevated powers”). Five are accessible through the exercise of concentration (*samādhi*): (1) “divine hearing” (*dibba-sota*) – consisting of being able to select and hear the voices of men or *devā*, near or far –, (2) knowledge of other people's minds (*ceto-pariya-ñāṇa*), (3) knowledge of one's own past lives (*pubbe-nivāsānussati-ñāṇa*), (4) “divine eye” (*dibba-cakkhu*) – enabling one to see at a very great distance or to see what usually escapes human vision, such as the presence of beings belonging to other planes of existence –, (5) paranormal faculties (*iddhī*). The sixth power is accessible via the penetrating vision (*vipassanā*): extinction of “mental fermentations” (*āsavā*), knowledge of one's own liberation, i.e. realisation of the state of *arahā*.

2.2. An effect of meditation

These powers are not “supernatural”; they are considered by Buddhism to be extensions of our ordinary mental capacities, accessible through meditation, more precisely through the mastery of the fourth “material *jhāna*”²; and more precisely through the use, within this fourth *jhāna*, of the second stage of concentration, “access concentration” (*upacāra-samādhi*): in fact, the first stage, “preliminary concentration” (*parikamma-samādhi*), resulting from the meditator's effort to concentrate his mind on the object of meditation, leaves no room for the appearance of such powers; as for

¹ Whereas *viññāna* represents the reaction to information from the senses and *citta* the subjective aspect of consciousness. Cf. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, London, 1914, p. 19.

² Cf. below, 3.2.2. the table of the *jhānā*.

the third stage, absorption concentration (*appaṇā-samādhi*), complete immersion of the mind in the object of meditation, it is too deep to allow such activity.³

2.3. Producing a body by mind is one of the *iddhī*

There are many *iddhī*. They are listed as follows⁴: being one, becoming many; making oneself visible, making oneself invisible; passing through matter; plunging into the earth as if it was water; walking on water as if it was earth; moving through space as if on earth; reaching other planets; shortening or lengthening distances; multiplying or reducing food; changing its taste; metamorphosing...

The choice of one of the ten traditional supports (*kaṣiṇā*) of concentration meditation favours the acquisition of a particular category of *iddhī* : the *kaṣiṇā* of earth thus gives access to splitting, to walking in space or on water, the *kaṣiṇā* of water enables one to plunge into the earth and emerge from it, to make it rain, to create rivers, to provoke earthquakes, the *kaṣiṇā* of the wind enables one to provoke hurricanes, etc.⁵

Mentally producing a double of oneself is one of these powers (the compound word *manomaya-iddhi* is sometimes used). This creation by meditators is described as follows:

When their mind (*citta*) has immersed itself in concentration (*samādhi*) in this way – purified, brilliant, flawless, free from corruptions, supple, easy to work with, stable and unperturbed – they project it (*abhinīharati*) and extend it (*abhininnāmeti*) towards the creation of a mind-produced body.

Sāmaññaphalasutta (S/DĪG I/#236-237)

Or:

Sometimes the Bhagavā immerses his body in his mind and his mind in his body. He meditates after reaching a feeling of bliss and lightness of his body. At this point, his body rises easily from the ground into the air. He masters the many types of psychic powers: he splits into two, then becomes one again [...]

Ayogūlasutta (S/SAM V/7/3/2/#834)

2.4. The characteristics of this mind-produced body

The terms used to describe the exact nature of this body are always the same:

Thus, from one's own body (*imanhā kāyā*) create by elevated power (*abhi-nimmināti*) another body (*aññaṃ kāyaṃ*), physical (*rūpiṃ*), mind-produced (*mano-mayaṃ*), complete in all its parts (*sabbaṅgapaccaṅgiṃ*), lacking no faculty (*a-hīn-indriyaṃ*).

Sāmaññaphalasutta (S/DĪG I/#236)⁶

What stands out from these elements is that we are dealing here with a physical double of the real body, not a mental or projected image. And that this double is not naturally present but voluntarily and temporarily created. We will come back to these characteristics when discussing the erroneous interpretations of the *manomaya kāya*.

³ Cf. Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda* (seconde édition), Éditions Soukha, Paris, 2018, p. 114 sq.

⁴ A list can be found in the *Kevaṭṭasutta* (S/DĪG I/11/#484) and more detailed descriptions in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (S/DĪG I/2/#238 to 249), in the *Ñānakathā* (AṬṬ/S/KHU/Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā/1/1/#50) and in Chapter XII (*Iddhividhaniddeso*) of the *Visuddhimagga*.

⁵ *Pakiṇṇakakathā* (*Visuddhimagga* V).

⁶ Cf. also *Subhasutta – Paññākkhandho* (S/DĪG I/#473), *Mahāsakuludāyisutta* (S/MAJ II/#253), etc.

2.5. The uses of the mind-produced body

The texts mention two possible uses for this mental prowess: visiting “divine worlds” and visiting other humans at a great distance.

2.5.1. Visiting “divine realms”

The most numerous references mention the ability of the Buddha to travel to various divine planes of existence, in particular the worlds inhabited by *brahmā*⁷.

The Venerable Ānanda advanced towards the Bhagavā, prostrated himself, sat down at his side and said:

- ‘Bhante, do you have any personal experience of visiting a divine world using the psychic power of creating a body through mind?’
- ‘Yes, Ānanda, I have such a personal experience.’
- ‘And do you have any personal experience of visiting a divine world using the psychic power of creating a body made up of the four primary elements?’
- ‘Yes, Ānanda, I have such a personal experience.’
- ‘It is incredible and astonishing that the Bhagavā is able to go to a divine world using the psychic power of creating a body through mind! And that he is able to go to a divine world using the psychic power of creating a body made up of the four primary elements!’

Ayogūlasutta (S/SAM V/7/3/2/#834)

Although the text seems to differentiate between a body created by the mind and a body “composed of the four primary elements”, it seems to be the same power here, the “four primary elements” being the equivalent of the characteristics “physical” and “complete in all its parts” of the above-mentioned definition. The purpose of this differentiation would be to graduate Ānanda's admiration: not only can the Buddha access other planes of existence by eliciting a body (which could be no more than an image), but this body also possesses the physical characteristics that make it very real.

2.5.2. Visiting humans at a great distance

Several texts tell of the creation by the Buddha of a double of himself in order to travel to distant disciples who required his presence.

This is the case, for example, when the Buddha, having perceived certain positive reflections of the Venerable Anuruddha, visits him to confirm the quality of his reasoning:

The Bhagavā then perceived the thoughts of the Venerable Anuruddha [...] As easily as a strong person would extend or contract his arm, he disappeared from the park of the Deer Wood, in the land of the Bhaggā and reappeared before the Venerable Anuruddha, in the park of the Bamboos, in the land of the Cetī; and he took his place on the Seat of the Teaching [...]

‘Knowing my thoughts, the Master without equal in the world,
using a mind-made body, using his psychic power, came to me!’

Anuruddhamahāvitakkasutta (S/AṄG VIII/3/10/#30)⁸

⁷ The texts speak of *brahmaloka*, literally “world of Brahṃā”. It seems preferable to us to translate this word by “divine world”, for a double reason: (1) Since the time of the Buddha himself, Indian languages have commonly used the word *brahmā* as a simple superlative with no direct link to divinity – just like the adjective “divine” in English; we find, for example, in Pāli texts, *brahmuttama*, “sublime”, *brahmabhakkha*, “an exquisite food”, *brahmavāda*, “an excellent speech”, *brahmassara*, “a beautiful voice”, etc. (2) The texts mention visits by the Buddha to worlds, for example that of the *Tāvātimsā*, which are not worlds inhabited by deities specifically called *brahmā*. Among the 26 divine worlds, there is nevertheless a particular link between *manomaya kāya* and the 3 planes of existence inhabited in the strict sense by *brahmā*; we will come back to this below: 3.2.2.

⁸ Verse taken up in the *Anuruddhattheragāthā* (S/KHU/Theragāthā/#901). Another *thera*, Tilamuttīdhīyaka, receives the same attention: *Tilamuttīdhīyakatthera-apadāna* (S/KHU/Therāpadāna-1/28/2/#5).

2.6. Who uses this power?

All meditators mastering the fourth material *jhāna* can have use of this power, from buddhas, obviously, as we have just seen, to the most advanced disciples, particularly if they are *arahā*. Moreover, the Buddha designates one of his *therā*, Cūḷapanthaka, as the most eminent in the use of this iddhi.⁹

The Buddha did not encourage his disciples to develop these powers, apart from the knowledge of the definitive eradication of the *āsavā*. Thus it is said¹⁰ of Sāriputta, the most eminent of the disciples, that he did not strive to develop paranormal powers and modes of knowledge, feeling no attraction for the five *abhiññā* in which, however, his friend Mahāmoggallāna excelled; however, these faculties ‘came spontaneously into his hands’, in parallel with his spiritual progress¹¹. In fact, in the course of disciplined mental development, these powers develop naturally; they are only a secondary effect and a possible personal proof of progress. They are not at all the goal of realisation; they can even be an obstacle to liberation when the person who obtains them is content with them¹², gets stuck in them or deduces erroneous theories from them.

Tradition is often more nuanced than the Buddha and lends certain advantages to the systematic cultivation of these powers:

Once the fourth *jhāna* has been attained in such and such a way, the ascetic should strive to acquire this knowledge, for his concentration (*samādhi*) will be more fruitful, more intense, and he will practise wisdom (*paññā*) with greater ease [...] The Bhagavā has cited five *abhiññā* to show those who have attained the fourth *jhāna* what benefits they can derive from strengthened concentration and what higher and more wonderful realities they can know.

Abhiññākathā (Visuddhimagga XII)

3. Manomaya as a characteristic of certain beings

Manomaya used isolated

<i>Tipiṭaka</i>	
<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>	0
<i>Suttā-piṭaka</i>	
<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	
<i>Sīlakkhandhavagga</i>	24
<i>Pāthikavagga</i>	1
<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	1
<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>	0
<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>	0
<i>Khuddhaka-nikāya</i>	1
<i>Abhidhamma-piṭaka</i>	1

Source: *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0 (Vipassana Research Institute)*

⁹ *Etadaggavaggo (S/ĀṄG I/14/2/#199)*. A *Commentary* relates that, in the very distant past, the Buddha Padumuttura had awarded a disciple the title of most eminent creator of *manomaya kāya*; having witnessed the scene, the future Cūḷapanthaka had vowed to have an identical power with a future buddha – *Cūḷapanthakattheravatthu (AṬṬ/ĀṄG I/14/2/#198-200)*.

¹⁰ *Sāriputtathera-gāthā (S/KHU/Theragāthā/17/2/#996)*.

¹¹ *Sāriputtattheragāthā-vaṇṇanā (AṬṬ/KHU/Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā/17/2)*.

¹² This was the case, we are told, of Devadatta: *Devadattasutta (S/KHU/Itivuttaka/3/4/10/#89)*.

3.1. The characteristic of certain rebirths

Used most often without being accompanied by *kāya*, and generally in the nominative form, the adjective *manomayo* characterises beings belonging to a certain category of planes of existence, planes of possible rebirth:

Poṭṭhapāda, there are three categories of rebirths (*attapaṭilābha*¹³): a rebirth with a body, a mind-produced rebirth and a rebirth without a body. What is a rebirth with a body? [The being] has a body composed of the four primary elements¹⁴ and consumes solid food. What is mind-produced rebirth? [The being] has a body, produced by mind, complete in all its parts, in which no faculty is lacking. What is a rebirth without a body? [Being] has no body; it is made up only of perceptions (*saññā*).

I teach the Dhamma for the abandonment of these three categories of rebirths.

Tayo attapaṭilābhā (“The three rebirths”) - *Poṭṭhapādasutta* (S/DĪG I/9/#428)

The fact that a rebirth is “mind-produced” has a major and very concrete counterpart, mentioned in the texts: the absence of passage through a womb¹⁵ – and therefore the absence of a development phase; the *deva* is immediately adult; his rebirth body is as he has thought it at the end of his previous existence.

3.2. The characteristic of certain deities

Details can be provided on the categories of *devā* concerned by such a “mind-produced rebirth”.

3.2.1. The rebirth planes

In all its canonical books, Theravāda recognises the reality of multiple planes of existence¹⁶. The texts list 31 possible destinations for rebirth, divided into 3 modes of existence:

There are, brother, three modes of existence (*bhavā*): the sensual mode of existence (*kāma-bhava*), the mode of existence with form [or body] (*rūpa-bhava*), the mode of existence without form [or body] (*arūpa-bhava*).

Sammādiṭṭhisutta (S/MAJ I/1/9/#94)

Tradition divides the mode of existence with form into 2 sub-categories: the mode of existence with form and the mode of existence with subtle form.

Of these 31 planes, 27 are favourable, populated by *devā* (“deities”), *brahmā* (a particular category of *devā*), or human beings; 4 are unfavourable, populated by victims of the underworld, animals, famished spirits or demigods.

¹³ Literally “the attainment, the acquisition of a self” during the cycle of rebirths; the *Commentary* (*Tayoattapaṭilābhavaṇṇanā*) explains that in this compound word *attā* is synonymous with *attabhāva*: *bhava*, “the mode of existence”, including a becoming, refers to the plane of existence in which one lives, and into which one is reborn after death so long as one has not been able to free oneself from the *samsāra*.

¹⁴ These primary properties (*dhātū*) are: (1) The element of solidity and extension (*paṭhavī-dhātu*), the substratum of matter; without it, objects cannot occupy space; this element is present in both earth, water, fire and air; it is also the element of extension by virtue of which objects occupy space. (2) The element of cohesion (*āpo-dhātu*) which determines the assembly of the atoms making up matter, preventing them from dispersing and giving them a form; it is this which, for example, gives the idea of a body. (3) The element of heat (*tejo-dhātu*) also encompasses its complement, cold; both constitute the vital energy which matures bodies, promotes their preservation and then leads to their destruction. (4) The element of mobility (*vāyo-dhātu*) gives rise to the expansion and contraction of matter.

¹⁵ The texts use the term *opapātikā*, “without visible cause”, i.e. without the sexual union of parents.

¹⁶ Referred to as *bhūmi* or *bhava* (“plane of existence”, “mode of existence”), *loka* (“world”), *yoni* (“type of birth”), *vacara* (“domain”), *gati* (“destination”, “destiny”), *sattā-vāsa* (“abode of beings”) and *āyatana* (“place, abode, domain”). Cf. Didier Treutenaere, *Bouddhisme et re-naissances dans la tradition Theravāda*, (seconde édition), Éditions Soukha, Paris, 2018.

Favourable existences	
Planes of existence without form	31) <i>devā</i> of “neither-perception-nor-non-perception” 30) <i>devā</i> of nothingness 29) <i>devā</i> of unbounded consciousness 28) <i>devā</i> of limitless space
Planes of existence with subtle form	27) <i>devā</i> without equal 26) <i>devā</i> of purity 25) <i>devā</i> of beauty 24) peaceful <i>devā</i>
Planes of existence with form	23) immobile <i>devā</i> 22) unconscious <i>devā</i> 21) very rich <i>devā</i> 20) <i>devā</i> with complete beauty 19) <i>devā</i> with limitless beauty 18) <i>devā</i> with lesser beauty 17) <i>devā</i> with inexhaustible radiance 16) <i>devā</i> with superior radiance 15) <i>devā</i> with inferior radiance 14) Great <i>brahmā</i> 13) head priests of the <i>brahmā</i> 12) retinue of <i>brahmā</i>
Sensuous planes of existence - celestial - terrestrial	11) <i>devā</i> enjoying the pleasures provided by others (<i>paranimmitavasavattī</i>) 10) <i>devā</i> enjoying their own mental creations (<i>nimmānaratī</i>) 9) contented <i>devā</i> (<i>Tusitā</i>) 8) <i>Yāmā devā</i> 7) Thirty-three <i>devā</i> (<i>Tāvātimsā</i>) 6) Four Great Guardian Sovereigns 5) humans
Unfavourable existences	
	4) demigods (<i>asurā</i>) 3) famished ghost (<i>petā</i>) 2) animals 1) inhabitants of hells

3.2.2. The rebirth planes concerned by *manomaya*

The texts confirm, sometimes without further precision, that there are planes of rebirth populated by beings who have produced themselves through their mind:

Some time later Uggā, of Vesālī, died. After his death he was reborn (*upapajji*) in a certain group (*aññataraṃ kāyaṃ*) [whose members are] mind-produced (*manomayaṃ*).¹⁷

Manāpadāyīsutta (S/AṄG V/4/#44)

When he died, Kakudho the Koliya, the servant of the Venerable Mahāmogallāna, was reborn into a certain group [whose members are] mind-produced. [The body into which he was born (*at-*

¹⁷ When he later came from his new world to pay homage to the Buddha, the texts referred to him as a *devaputta*, a “son of divinity”, a deity.

tabhāvapaṭilābho) was two or three times the size of a village in Māgadha¹⁸, a size that did not bother him or the others. *Kakudhatherasutta* (S/AṄG V/10/#100)¹⁹

Some texts are more precise:

Consider a monk who is fully accomplished as well in ethics (*sīla*) as in concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*). He can enter into – and emerge from – the cessation of perception and sensation (*saññāvedayitanirodha*). This is possible. If he does not achieve the attainment of the Dhamma (Liberation) in this life, he will be reborn among the mind-produced *devā*, situated above the *devā* “which require solid nourishment” (*kabaḷīkārahārabhakkhānaṃ*).

Nirodhasutta (S/AṄG V/6/#166)

This passage is doubly instructive.

On the one hand, it confirms the link between the degrees of meditative realisation and rebirths on high, “divine” planes of existence: the text mentions here “the cessation of perception” and thus indicates that access to the worlds characterised by *manomaya* is opened by mastery of the fourth “immaterial *jhāna*”, which immediately precedes the 4 “supra-mundane realisations” constituting the path to Liberation.

The degrees of meditation

Insight (wisdom) <i>vipassanā</i> (<i>pañña</i>)	8 super-mundane realisations - Liberation (path / fruit) - Non-return (path / fruit) - Once-return (path / fruit) - Stream-winning (path / fruit)
Concentration (serenity) <i>samādhi</i> (<i>samatha</i>)	4 immaterial <i>jhānā</i> - Neither-perception-nor-non-perception - Nothingness - Unbounded consciousness - Limitless space 4 material <i>jhānā</i> - Fourth <i>jhāna</i> - Third <i>jhāna</i> - Second <i>jhāna</i> - First <i>jhāna</i>

On the other hand, this passage allows us to begin to situate the worlds whose beings are mind-produced: they are above those of the *devā* “requiring solid food”²⁰, i.e. above the *devā* whose existence is still dominated by the senses – categories (6) to (11) of our table. And, as we already know, below the *devā* without body – categories (28) to (31), “reserved” for ascetics committed to the path of Liberation.

The cosmogonical *suttā* provide additional details. The Canon opens²¹ with a text in which the Buddha sets out his doctrine in opposition to the beliefs of his time; in particular, he rewrites the common genesis of Gangetic India, making the god Brahmā the creator of the universe:

¹⁸ In ancient India, measurements were linked to the rural context. Here we are most likely talking about the *gāvuta*, corresponding to the perimeter within which... it is possible to hear the mooing of a cow (the typical perimeter of a village), i.e. 3 km. Our *deva* is therefore between 6 and 9 km in size..

¹⁹ This passage is repeated in the *Vinaya: Devadattavatthu* (V/Cūḷavagga/#333).

²⁰ This precision is also provided by the *Nandiyasutta* (S/AṄG XI/3/#13).

²¹ The *Brahmajālasutta* is placed at the beginning of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, itself at the beginning of the *Sutta-piṭaka*.

There comes a time, following a very long period, when this universe contracts. When the universe is contracting, individual beings are frequently born in the *brahmā* plane of existence called *ābhassarā*. These beings, produced by their own mind, feed on joy, radiate their own light, move through space, reside in glory and beauty and remain alive for a very long time. Then, a long time later, comes a time when the world is rebuilt and amplified. In this world another plane of *brahmā* existence arises, but empty. Then an individual being, separating himself from the group of *ābhassarā*, either as a result of the exhaustion of his longevity or because of the exhaustion of his merits, is reborn in this still empty plane of *brahmā* existence. This being too, created by its own mind, feeding on joy, radiating its own light, moves in space, dwells in glory and beauty and stays alive for a very long time. Remaining alone for a long time, it is uncomfortable and, in its displeasure, it wishes ‘that other beings could manage to live here’. Other beings, abandoning the group of *ābhassarā*, either as a result of the exhaustion of their longevity or because of the exhaustion of their merits, are reborn in the company of this being. Then, in the being who was born first arises this idea: ‘I am Brahmā; I am the Great Brahmā, the dominator, the indomitable, the omniscient, the all-powerful, the creator, the fabricator, the craftsman, the supreme being, the one who organises everything, the one who attracts everything, the father of all beings who have been born and who will be born. I created these beings. Why? Because I had this idea: ‘that other beings should manage to live here’. That was my wish and these beings came here according to my wish’. In the other beings, this idea is born: ‘here he is, the honourable Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the dominator, the indomitable [...] It is he, the honourable Brahmā, who created us’. Why do they think like this? Because they think: ‘we saw him exist here as the first; as for us, we were born after him’.

Brahmajālasutta (S/DĪG I/1/#40-43)²²

This passage therefore definitely attributes the *manomaya* characteristic to the beings in the planes of existence 12) to 14) of our table. On the other hand, the texts are less precise about the presence of this characteristic in the inhabitants of the remaining divine worlds – 15) to 27); when they describe these deities, they focus more on what distinguishes them from one another – for example²³ the origin of the differences in radiance between the *devā* of the realms 15) to 17) – than on a possible common *manomaya*. This forces us to return to the three initial categories of *at-tapaṭilābhā*: a rebirth with a body and under the domination of the senses – planes 1) to 11); a rebirth with a body produced by mind – planes 12) to 14) with certainty, probably 15) to 23) and possibly 24) to 27)²⁴; a rebirth without body – planes 28) to 31).

Although our approach is insufficient to achieve a complete understanding of what these “mind-produced bodies” are in the Pāli Canon, the elements discovered along the way enable us to know with greater certainty *what these bodies cannot be*, and thus to be able to discard certain erroneous interpretations of the ancient doctrine.

²² This story is repeated in the *Pāthikasutta* – *Aggaññapaññattikathā* (S/DĪG III/1/#38).

²³ *Anurudhhasutta* (S/MAJ III/3/7).

²⁴ A *Commentary* seems to link *manomaya* to *suddhāvāsā*, “the Pure Abodes”, i.e. to planes of existence 23) to 27) of our table: *aññataraṃ manomayanti suddhāvāsesu ekaṃ jhānāmanena nibbattaṃ devakāyaṃ* – *Manāpadāyīsuttavaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/AṄG V/4/#44). But the same text then uses a more confused expression: *suddhāvāsabrahmakāyaṃ* – *Nirodhasuttavaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/AṄG V/6/#166). Here again – cf. note 7 – it is tricky to decide concerning the term *brahma* between its broad meaning, “divine”, and its strict meaning, “of brahma(s)”.

4. Erroneous interpretations

4.1. What we do know

We have distinguished, in the Pāli Canon, two distinct domains making use of *manomaya*. Each of these domains has clearly enumerated elements.

(1) The mind-produced body, as a fruit of meditation:

- it is a real, physical body (*rūpiṃ*), not an image; it has all the attributes (*sabbaṅgapaccaṅgiṃ*) and all the faculties (*ahīnindriyaṃ*) of the body of which it is the double.

- this body is created (*nimmināti*); it does not exist without a will²⁵ to bring it about; it does not therefore exist permanently, nor does it appear spontaneously.

- its creation requires mastery of a higher degree (*abhi-*) of meditative realisation (*jhāna*)²⁶; this is a high power (*abhiññā*), a paranormal faculty (*iddhi*), not a common ability.

(2) The mind-produced body, as a characteristic of certain beings:

- it is one of the characteristics of beings belonging to certain planes of existence (*bhavā*), subject to a certain mode of rebirth (*attapaṭilābhā*).

- this mode of rebirth only concerns beings who are accomplished “in ethics (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*)” and who can “enter into – and emerge from – the cessation of perception and sensation (*saññāvedayitanirodha*)”, i.e. the fourth immaterial *jhāna*.

4.2. Questionable interpretations

4.2.1. A summary

A dictionary, which we are told is “the most comprehensive and authoritative dictionary of Buddhism ever produced in English”, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*²⁷, in his entry *manomayakāya* (p. 528b), allows us to observe the multiplication of questionable assertions, **(em)mixing the two domains concerned by *manomaya***: the paranormal power of creating a double of the body and one of the characteristics of certain *devā*. The dictionary also seems to consider that most of its definitions are more or less shared by all currents of Buddhism, although this is far from being the case.

● “A subtle body” – The ancient texts state that the body created by the mind via an *iddhi* has the same physical characteristics as the body it doubles; there is therefore nothing to justify the adjective “subtle”; on the other hand, this adjective can be associated with some of the ‘divine’ planes of existence.

● “A subtle body [...] which can exercise psychical and magical powers, such as passing through solid objects, appearing in many places at once, or flying” – The creation of a body by the mind, which is only one *iddhi* among others, becomes here the necessary support for the exercise of all the other powers, which no ancient text suggests.

● “The *manomayakāya* is also analogous to the ‘transitional being’ (*ghandarva*) that abides in the *antarābhava*, the intermédiaire state between death and rebirth” – This assertion belongs only to the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna currents: it is based on the misappropriation, by various schools, of rare and delicate ancient terms, a misappropriation condensed by Vasubandhu (4th or 5th century) in his

²⁵ The *Visuddhimagga* uses the expression *adhiṭṭhānāmanena nimmitattā manomayaṃ*, *adhiṭṭha* being “will”, “resolution”, “determination” – *Nandopanandanāgadamānakathā* (*Visuddhimagga* XII/#397). *Idem*: *Iddhikathāvaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/KHU/*Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā*/2/#12).

²⁶ The *Commentaries* use the following expressions: «*jhānāmanena nibbattatā manomayā*» – *Brahmajālasuttavaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/DIG I/1/#39); «*manomayoti jhānāmanena nibbatto*» – *Brahmajālasuttavaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/DIG I/1/#87); «*jhānāmanena nibbattaṃ devakāyaṃ*» – *Manāpadāyīsuttavaṇṇanā* (AṬṬ/AṄG V/4/#44), etc.

²⁷ Robert E. Buswell Jr., Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, 2013.

Abhidharmakośa, a Sanskrit work setting out the theses of the schismatic Sarvastivāda school; it states that the “intermediate existence” between two existences, *antarābhava*, has five names: *gandhabba*, *manomaya*, *sambhaisinis* and *nirvṛtti* (*Abhidharmakośa* P3/40c-41a/2:122). With regard to this statement, which marks a profound break between the Theravāda current and the other two major currents of Buddhism, we refer the reader to the articles we have devoted to *antarābhava*²⁸ and *gandhabba*²⁹. To summarise our objection to this point: (a) according to Theravāda orthodoxy, the *gandhabba* is not a “being” but the symbol (medium) of the – immediate – transmission of *kamma* between a dying being and an embryo; there is no need for the medium of this transmission to be a “body” and even less a “being”; the analogy between the phenomenon symbolised by the *gandhabba* and the production of a body by mind is therefore partial; (b) according to Theravāda orthodoxy, there is no such thing as an “intermediate state” between two existences (*antarābhava*)³⁰; so there's no point in trying to use *manomaya* to label something that remains in a state... that does not exist.

- “Existence in any of the four meditative (*dyāna*) paradise of either the subtle-materiality realm (*rūpadhatu*) or the immaterial realm (*ārūpyadhātu*) may also sometimes be designated as a heavenly mind-made body (*divyo manomayaḥ kāyaḥ*)” – This assertion should be referenced insofar as an ancient *sutta* develops precisely... the opposite position, summarised as follows:

Rebirth (*attapaṭilābha*) with a mind-produced body (*manomayo*) cannot be categorised as either rebirth with a body (*oḷāriko*) or rebirth without a body (*arūpo*).

Poṭṭhapādasutta (S/DĪG I/9/n° 437, second §)

- “Mind-made bodies may be perceived only by the *divyacaksus*, literally the ‘divine eye’, one of the five (or six) super-knowledges (*abhijñā*)” – In the first domain of *manomaya* that we have analysed, the bodies produced by the mind are intended to create a real interview between the meditator and his distant interlocutor (from this world, or from another plane of existence), generally to help him enter or progress on the Way; the requirement of prior possession of the paranormal power of the “divine eye” by this interlocutor would reduce this use to nothing. The dictionary's statement would only be acceptable if, retaining the second domain of *manomaya*, it specified: “Deities with bodies produced by thought can only be perceived by human beings if the latter possess the ‘divine eye’”.

4.2.2. Confusion with Hinduism

The uncertainties concerning *manomaya kāya* in the ancient Buddhist texts and the similarity with the words of Brahmanism, prompt some authors and translators to seek more precise answers in the various doctrines of Hinduism.

From its very founding texts³¹, Vedism teaches that the *ātman*, the soul, is veiled under 5 “sheaths” (skt. *kośa*), thus classified from the coarsest to the subtlest:

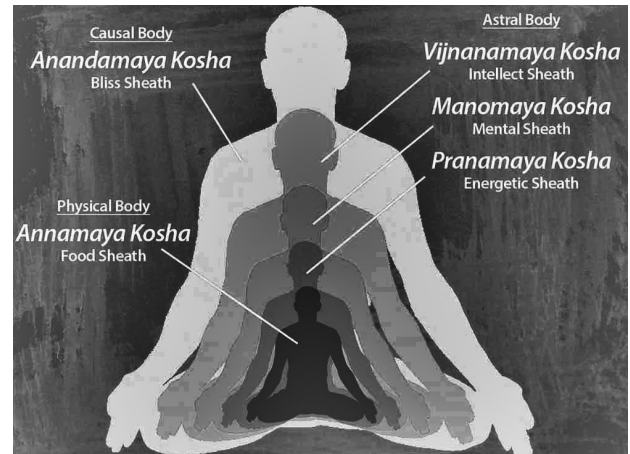
²⁸ Didier Treutenaere, *To do away with the “intermediate state” (antarābhava) between two existences. A presentation of the orthodox Theravāda position and a critical review of the divergent positions*, academia.edu, November 2023.

²⁹ Didier Treutenaere, “*Gandhabba*”: meanings and uses in the Pāli Canon, academia.edu, January 2024.

³⁰ *Sabbena sabbam natthi nāma antarābhavo*: “Definitely: there is absolutely no in-between state” – *Antarābhavakathāvaṇṇanā* (Tikā/Abh/Pañcapakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/Kathāvattthupakaraṇa-anuṭṭikā/8/2/#505).

³¹ The first mention of the 5 “sheaths” appears in the *Taittirīya Upanishad*, composed around the sixth century BC – thus at the time of the Buddha – and inserted, in the form of three chapters, in the *Yajurveda*: “Different from this Self, which consists of the essence of vital energy [the *pranamaya kośa*, the vital sheath, the etheric body], although situated within the sheath of the latter, is another inner Self which, for its part, is made up of consciousness, of mental matter (*manas*). Yes, it is this Self that fills the sheath with vital energy. And this Self also has the human form, modelled on that of the sheath of vital energy.”

(1) *Annamaya kośa*, the physical body (skt. *anna*, solid food); (2) *Pranamaya kośa*, the vital principle (skt. *prāṇa*, air); (3) *Manomaya kośa*, the 5 senses and the mind; (4) *Vijñānamaya kośa*, discernment, knowledge; (5) *Ānandamaya kośa*, the body of bliss (skt. *ānanda*). Later, these 5 “sheaths” of the soul will be grouped into 3 “bodies” (skt. *śārīra*): *sthūla śārīra*, the body made of matter; *sūkṣma śārīra* the subtle body; *kaṛaṇa śārīra*, the “causal” body.



It is clear that ancient Buddhism shares certain expressions (such as *manomaya*) and certain categorisations (such as the division into 3 groups) with Hinduism. But the simplest analysis shows us that the comparison stops at the appearance of the terms. For Hinduism, *manomaya* is a constant property of every human being, one of the five bodily “sheaths” to be removed in order to liberate the *ātman*. For ancient Buddhism, *manomaya* is either the paranormal production of a temporary doubling, or the dominant character of the *devā* of certain planes of existence; the *ātman* has no bodily ‘envelopes’... because there is no *ātman*.

We are therefore dealing here with one of the many ways in which the words of Brahmanism have been diverted for the benefit of Buddhist doctrine³². To rely on Hinduism to provide an explanation of these diverted notions is, in our view, to travel the Buddhist path in reverse.

4.2.3. The New Age confusion

Some authors and translators are subject to the influence of the Western mishmash which, for more than a century, has mobilised in its own way elements drawn largely from a revisited Hinduism.

An example of a singular interpretation of *manomaya kāya* can be found in the notes by Bhikkhu Sujato – an author who nonetheless belongs to the Theravāda tradition – accessible in the margin of his translation of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*³³.

● “The ‘mind-made body’ is the interior mental representation of the physical body. In ordinary consciousness it is proprioception³⁴, which here is enhanced by the power of meditation.” – *Manomaya kāya* is therefore reduced by our translator to an inner experience, a common and permanent human experience, which meditation only develops.

This conception is close to those of the *Sāmkhya Kārikā* (2nd century) and the *Vedānta* of Ādi Śaṅkara (8th century): *manomaya* is characterised there as the inner and lower mental “sheath” integrating sensations, emotions, desires; it also concerns dreams, ghostly apparitions, etc.

This reduction to an inner experience does not seem to be able to account for either of the two sides of the *manomaya kāya* mentioned in ancient Buddhism: the real, physical, external duplication – as

³² In the field we are dealing with here, the most exemplary change of use is that of the ‘Three Sciences’ (*te-vijjā*): for a Brahmin, mastery of the Three Sciences meant that he knew (i.e. could recite and ritually use) the three *Vedas* (the *Rgveda*, the *Sāmaveda* and the *Yajurveda*); for the Buddhist ascetic, possession of the Three Sciences means that he masters three *abhiññā* – knowledge of past lives, the “divine eye” and knowledge of his own liberation. Cf. for example: *Tikaṇṇasutta* (S/AṄG III/6/8#59).

³³ Bhikkhu Sujato, translation of the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, *suttacentral.net*, accessed on 25 April 2024.

³⁴ Proprioception, or deep sensitivity, refers to the perception, whether conscious or not, of the position of different parts of the body, without having recourse to vision.

it is defined in this *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, “another body (*aññaṃ kāyaṃ*), physical (*rūpiṃ*), complete in all its parts (*sabbaṅgapaccāṅgiṃ*), from which no faculty (*a-hīn-indriyaṃ*) is lacking” –; or the characteristic limited to certain forms of existence.

● “This is similar to the experience of the ‘astral body’ described by modern spiritualists.”

For our translator, is this the “astral body” of Allan Kardec's spiritualist doctrine?

“Man thus has two natures: through his body, he participates in the nature of animals, whose instincts he shares; through his soul, he participates in the nature of spirits. The link or ‘perispirit’ that unites the body and the spirit is a sort of semi-material envelope. Death is the destruction of the grosser envelope; the spirit retains the second, which constitutes for him an ethereal body, invisible to us in the normal state, but which he may accidentally render visible and even tangible, as happens in the phenomenon of apparitions.”³⁵

If this is the case, we are a long way from ancient Buddhism: for Theravāda, death and rebirth are not the occasion for the liberation of a soul and its reincarnation, but for a transmission of *kamma* between a dying being and a being to be born; there is no envelope surviving death... because there is in fact nothing left to envelop.

Is it rather the “astral body” of modern Theosophy and the currents it has inspired?

“‘Astral body’, or Astral ‘Double’ – The ethereal counterpart or shadow of man or animal: the *Linga Sharīra*³⁶, the *Doppelgänger*³⁷.”

“‘Linga Sharira’ – The aerial symbol of the body. This term refers to the *Döppelganger* or ‘astral body’ of man or animal. It is the ‘eidolon’ of the Greeks, the vital and ‘prototypal’ body: the reflection of men of flesh. It was born before the body and dies or dissipates when the last atom of the body disappears.”³⁸ “This astral body interpenetrates the physical body, while extending beyond the limits of the body in all directions; the portion of the astral body that extends beyond the body is generally called the ‘astral aura’.”³⁹

Despite the greater subtlety of the Theosophists' presentation, the comparison between the “astral body” and the *manomaya kāya* of ancient texts is no less dubious: the “astral body” is defined as an element common to every human or animal being, as a reflection of his body; the *manomaya kāya* of ancient Buddhism, in its first sense is not a permanent reflection but a concrete temporary creation, and in its second sense is common only to certain devā.

● “This is the subtle (*sukhuma*) body, which is an energetic experience of physical properties by the mind.” – This definition is more or less in line with Hinduism, but its application to Theravāda texts is forced. Such an interpretation is based on a very partial use of the notion of “subtle body”.

The adjective *sukhuma*, associated with the noun *rūpa* is indeed present in the Pāli Canon:

³⁵ Allan Kardec, *Le livre des Esprits*, Introduction, VI, seconde édition originale de 1860, p. 9.

³⁶ The *Linga Śarīra* is, in late Sāṃkhya, Vedānta and Yoga, the “vehicle” of the consciousness, the characteristic mark of the transmigrating entity.

³⁷ *Doppelgänger* is a German word meaning “sosie” or “double of a living person”. It is found in Germanic and Nordic folklore and mythology, where it refers to the ghostly double of a living person.

³⁸ Helena P. Blavatsky, *Glossaire théosophique* (1892), Adyar, 1981, p. 105, 217.

³⁹ Arthur E. Powell, *Le corps astral et autres phénomènes astraux*, Éditions Adyar, 1928.

<i>Tipiṭaka</i>	
<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>	1
<i>Suttā-piṭaka</i>	
<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>	0
<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>	7
<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>	12
<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>	5
<i>Khuddhaka-nikāya</i>	0
<i>Abhidhamma-piṭaka</i>	
<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>	36
<i>Vibhaṅga</i>	6
<i>Kathāvatthu</i>	2
<i>Other books</i>	0

Source: *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka 4.0* (Vipassana Research Institute)

These occurrences, which are few in number, are used exclusively in two ways.

(1) *Sukhuma* first appears in an enumeration of qualifiers intended to exhaust all the possible characteristics of *rūpa*, prior to the assertion that, whatever the case, *rūpa* cannot be the support of an *attā* (skt. *ātman*):

Whatever the material form (*rūpaṃ*), past, future or present, personal or impersonal, gross (*oḷārikam*) or subtle (*sukhumam*), low or eminent, distant or near, every material form (*sabbaṃ rūpaṃ*) must be seen by the perfect intuitive wisdom (*sammappaññāya*) thus: “it is not ‘mine’, it is not ‘what I am’, it is not ‘my *attā*’ (*netam mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā*)”.

Mahārāhulovādasutta (S/MAJ II/2/2/#113)

(2) *Sukhuma*, in most instances of the *Abhidhamma*, is simply used to describe material phenomena that do not contribute directly to consciousness⁴⁰:

The five sense organs and the seven sense objects are gross (*oḷārikarūpaṃ*), proximate (*santikerūpaṃ*) and productive [of sensations] (*sappaṭigharūpaṅca*). The rest [of the matter] is subtle (*sukhumarūpaṃ*), distant and unproductive.

Rūpaparicchedo (*Abhidhammatthasaṅgaho*/6/#23)

There is therefore no direct reference to a “subtle body” – we should note, moreover, the total absence in the texts of any association of *sukhuma* and *kāya* – and *a fortiori* to a “subtle body” parallel to the “gross” body. Many canonical explanations suggest, on the contrary, that the body of beings is always unique, whatever their plane of existence, whatever the dosage of the components of their material aggregate:

What is the aggregate of matter (*rūpakkhandho*)? Whether matter is past, future or present, personal or impersonal, gross or subtle (*sukhumam*), low or eminent, distant or near – This is called the aggregate of matter.

Khandhasutta (S/SAM III/1/5/6/#48)⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Manomaya* would even be the opposite of *sukhuma*, since in both cases in the ancient texts, the mind-produced body does indeed have a consciousness, and this consciousness is necessarily nourished, close and productive. This is where the distinction lies between the *devā* “with subtle form” – 24) to 27) – and the *devā* “with form” - 12) to 23): the mind of the former is no longer fed, disturbed, by their form.

⁴¹ *Rūpakkhandho* (ABH/*Vibhaṅga*/1/1/1/n° 2).

Conclusion

Rūpaṃ bhikkhave anattā, vedanā anattā, saññā anattā, saṅkhārā anattā, viññāṇaṃ anattā.
O monks, the body is without *attā*, sensations are without *attā*, perceptions are without *attā*,
mental creations are without *attā*, consciousness is without *attā*.

Anattasutta (S/SAM III/1/2/3)

In the Pāli Canon, *manomaya kāya*, the “mind-produced body” – a misappropriation of Brahmanical terms – refers either to an exact double of the body produced by a paranormal faculty arising from meditation, or to a characteristic of the nature of certain *devā*. For Theravāda, this expression can designate neither one of the “sheaths” of the *ātman* – for there is no *ātman* to be sheathed – nor a “subtle” layer of the body – for the body is one – nor the being between death and rebirth – for there is no intermediate state between these two moments.

Ancient Buddhism is not sparing – even if it is less prolix in this area than the later currents – in its accounts of ascetics' paranormal faculties and of the deities inhabiting other planes of existence; on the other hand, it is less forthcoming in its analysis of these phenomena and states; this discretion stems from the fact that the Buddhist ascetic does not set as the objective of his psychic development the multiplication of prodigies but the liberation from all attachment, and does not seek access to a divine rebirth but the end of rebirths. If our curiosity prevails nonetheless, essential answers can be found in the Pāli Canon; an approach preferable to that of an *a priori* diversions through other Buddhist traditions, other Indian traditions, or through the meanders of occultist and New Age doctrines.

Bangkok
May 2024



Using a double of his body, the Buddha visits the divine world of the *Tāvātimsā*,
to teach the *Abhidhamma* to his defunct mother, who had become a *deva*.
(Contemporary image)

Table of contents

Introduction	p. 1
1. The expression <i>manomaya kāya</i>	p. 1
1.1. The meaning	p. 1
1.2. A rare expression	p. 2
2. A psychic power	p. 2
2.1. The paranormal powers	p. 2
2.2. An effect of meditation	p. 2
2.3. Producing a body by mind is one of the <i>iddhī</i>	p. 3
2.4. The characteristics of this mind-produced body	p. 3
2.5. The uses of the mind-produced body	p. 4
2.5.1. Visiting “divine realms”	p. 4
2.5.2. Visiting humans at a great distance	p. 4
2.6. Who uses this power?	p. 5
3. <i>Manomaya</i> as a characteristic of certain beings	p. 5
3.1. The characteristic of certain rebirths	p. 6
3.2. The characteristic of certain deities	p. 6
3.2.1. The rebirth planes	p. 6
3.2.2. The rebirth planes concerned by <i>manomaya</i>	p. 7
4. Erroneous interpretations	p. 10
4.1. What we do know	p. 10
4.2. Questionable interpretations	p. 10
4.2.1. A summary	p. 10
4.2.2. Confusion with Hinduism	p. 11
4.2.3. The New Age confusion	p. 12
Conclusion	p. 15
