

Huayan Buddhism

Introduction

A major but short-lived school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Huayan (Flower Garland, also Hua-Yen) is a highly abstract explanation of the nature of the world and how to attain enlightenment within that world. It is generally considered a highlight of Mahayana thinking in China and is gaining recognition more generally in world philosophy today. It developed in stages, matured, and died out as a school during the Tang dynasty from the sixth to ninth century CE. It proposes that all phenomena interpenetrate and are mutually contained in each other, a notion based on the *Avatamsaka* (Flower Garland or Ornament) *Sutra* and on Chinese commentaries on the sutra. Huayan strongly influenced emerging schools of Buddhist practice in East Asia, especially Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Today there is growing recognition among Zen practitioners of the importance of Huayan thought as essential background for their practice. More broadly, it heightens our awareness of the intricate and fragile interconnections that exist among the phenomena of our increasingly threatened world.¹

This primer provides a brief overview of the school's history and development, key teachings, and practices.

History and Development

According to Song period (960-1179) and later storytelling, five patriarchs founded the Huayan system of thought: (1) Tu-shun (Dushun, 557-640), (2) Chih-yen (Zhiyan, 602-668), (3) Fa-tsang (Fazang, 643-712), (4) Chengguan (Ch'eng-kuan, 738-839), and (5) Tsung-mi (Zongmi, 780-841). Each wrote dense but profound commentaries on the sutra, a radically different narrative form than the lush, fantastical, surreal prose of the sutra itself.² It was established if not named as a school near the end of the Sui dynasty and the beginning of the Tang dynasty (c. 600-700 CE). It perished in China by 845 following a harsh purge of Buddhism by a new emperor and perhaps an exhaustion of new ideas.³ While no longer recognized as a formal school except in Japan, it has remained an active tradition of thought in Buddhism in Asia and increasingly in the West.⁴

Although founded on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, much of the formal terminology and imagery for which the school is known occur in commentaries on the sutra by its patriarchs. Tu-shun and Chih-yen formulated fundamental terms and concepts of the school in its early period of development; Fa-tsang in what has been called the classic period systematized and elaborated innovations of the early period; Chengguan and Tsung-mi in the late period increasingly incorporated indigenous Confucian and Daoist concepts into Huayan thought and merged it more closely with Chan (Zen) Buddhism, which had become a dominant force in Chinese Buddhism by that time.⁵

While the first patriarch Tu-shun is remembered primarily as a miracle-worker who lived close to the peasantry in the country and Chih-yen was a hermit monk, Fa-tsang,

Chengguan, and Tsong-mi were closely integrated into the imperial court. Fa-tsang famously became an adviser to Empress Wu (c. 625-705), who attempted to use Huayan ideology to govern her empire.

Key Teachings

The teachings of the Huayan patriarchs both exemplify and elaborate on concepts in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. An example of this process is their consideration of the most useful ways to conceive of reality. A well-known conceptual scheme, the *Fourfold Dharmadhatu*, teaches four ways to view reality in meditative awareness. The first part is seeing the universal oneness of all things (the ultimate or absolute reality); the second part is seeing the particular in everyday activities (that is, our conventional reality); the third part is seeing the mutual, non-obstructing interpenetration of the universal oneness and the particular (for the universal can only exist in the particular); and the fourth part is seeing the mutual, non-obstructing interpenetration of particulars with all other particulars (in which particulars fully interpenetrate one another). The fourth way of conceiving of reality was considered a great advance by the Huayan school over other schools' views of reality.⁶

To illustrate the doctrine of the mutual containment and interpenetration of all phenomena, the patriarchs resorted to images and metaphors to make the doctrine's intricate meaning more accessible to practitioners, such as Empress Wu. One was the well-known parable attributed to Tu-shun of Indra's net, an elaboration of imagery in the sutra.

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected *all* the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.⁷

Fa-tsang famously illustrated this way of viewing the phenomenal as well in his *Essay on the Golden Lion*. Using a golden statue of a lion as a metaphor, he "explained the non-obstructing interpenetration of the universal and particular by describing in detail how the gold, like the universal principle, pervaded the object completely, but that its particular unique form was that of a lion. We can see it either as gold or as a lion. But each part of the golden lion is completely gold, and each part is also completely part of the lion." In another metaphor he used the example of a house and one of its rafters to explain the relationship between a whole and its parts. The rafter is part of the house, and since a house is nothing other than its parts, and the parts cannot be parts unless they are integrated into a whole, the house and the rafter create each other.⁸ Using metaphors like these, Fa-tsang intended

to demonstrate that every particular phenomenon in the cosmos exercises a complete and determinative role in the being of all other particular phenomena.

These illustrations reached conclusions that the unenlightened find puzzling, but they are an integral part of Huayan philosophy. Examples are: Inside everything is everything else, and yet no things are confused; Each part in itself fully exemplifies the entirety of the whole; Nothing exists truly in and of itself, but requires everything to be what it is; All things are contained in each individual; Everything is identical because each phenomenon relates to and defines every other phenomenon (yet each phenomenon is again also distinct); The whole universe is contained in a grain of sand; and, The links of interdependence expand throughout the entire universe and at all times (past, present, and future).⁹

Besides these metaphors the patriarchs wrote dense explorations of aspects of interconnectedness, such as nature origination, the conditioned origination of the dharmadhatu, the ten-fold causes for realization of totality, the samadhi of oceanic reflection, the non-obstruction of space and time, the six aspects of all dharmas, and the ten non-obstructions of totality. Most readers find these commentaries overly dense, for they require an intimate familiarity with the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, with traditional patterns of thought in medieval China, and with a myriad of companion commentaries. However, for the most part they are elaborations (if mind bending) on notions illustrated in the metaphors.

Another focus of Huayan studies was making sense of the diverse teachings of the Buddha. Since the Buddha taught to the capability of his audiences, his teachings range from overly simple and thus partial accounts to his true vision upon awakening, or so it is argued by Mahayana Buddhists. As an example, Fa-tsang constructed a fivefold scheme of doctrinal classification (P'an-chiao) to correct what he saw as inadequacies in earlier classifications. His rankings from the simplest and most misleading to the Buddha's true teaching are: (1) the Hinayana teachings; (2) elementary Mahayana, including Yogacara and Madhyamaka; (3) advanced Mahayana: the "Final Teachings" based on the Tathagatagarbha-teachings, especially the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*; (4) the Sudden Teaching, which revealed rather than verbalized the teachings; and (5) the Complete, or Perfect, Teachings of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the Huayan school. The differences among the patriarchs' doctrinal classifications likely relate to changes taking place in Chinese Buddhism and society more broadly during the Huayan tenure as a school. For example, Chih-yen's early classification was shaped in part by complicated hermeneutical issues surrounding doctrinal differences among Buddhist schools during the formative period of the school; a concern of Fa-tsang was the legitimization of Huayan thought by systematizing it and giving it a sectarian identity; and Tsung-mi organized his later classification around soteriological issues as lay religious societies were becoming increasingly important as a source of patronage.¹⁰

Huayan Practices

Tu-shun, the first patriarch of the Huayan school, is said to have centered his practice on reciting or chanting sections of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a practice that remains popular

today. The rationale is that the sutra is not meant to be grappled with intellectually, but to be immersed and thoroughly steeped in; as phrased by Taigen Leighton, the contents of the sutra are best absorbed “by bathing in the imagery, as if listening to a symphony.”¹¹ Courses today in Buddhist centers on the sutra and Huayan typically open with a 20-minute or so reciting or chanting of parts of the sutra.

A traditional meditation practice promoted by the patriarchs was to meditate on three of the perspectives on reality in the fourfold dharmadhatu as a means to develop flexibility in conceiving of reality. While sitting in meditative absorption, one first meditates on the emptiness of all phenomena, then on the mutual non-obstruction of emptiness (the ultimate or absolute) and phenomena, and finally on the mutual non-obstruction between phenomena and other phenomena. Always pragmatic, Mahayana Buddhism was not committed to seeing reality as “it really is,” but to exploring whatever reality might be from multiple perspectives. To cling dogmatically to a “correct” view of reality was considered a pathway to suffering and confusion (*samsara*).

The implications of the Huayan notion of interdependence of all phenomena have also been taught using tools that focus on the seemingly mundane in everyday life. A traditional way that dates back to the sutra itself is to place written verses (gathas) on notes in places of everyday activity, such as where you wash your hands or brush your teeth; in this practice one also memorizes sayings to recite when in motion, such as when meeting people or entering a house. An example is, “When washing the face with water/They should wish that all beings/Attain the pure teaching/And be forever free from defilement.” The verses encourage mindfulness, compassion for all beings, and remembrance that all activities and things, no matter how mundane and seemingly trivial, are equally important in their mutual interdependence.¹²

Huayan practice also uses images of visions of the world as seen by a Buddha as a focus of meditation. An example is the holographic image of the ocean seal samadhi. In this meditation one opens one’s mind to the entire universe and the detail of all phenomena as if one were gazing out across the surface of a vast ocean. Introspectively, the meditator observes the mirror-like quality of the ocean (their mind) and how waves intermittently roil its placid surface. The meditator then imagines the surface of the ocean becoming calm once again as the waves subside. During meditation the roiling of the surface can be gentle or strong, but with patience and the cultivation of mindfulness the mirror-like quality of the ocean (the mind) always returns.

Modern Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hahn and Robert Aitkin provide examples of these types of meditation more suited to our contemporary setting. For example, Nhat Hahn provides a variety of contemporary images using the concept of “inter-are.” Consider looking at a piece of paper. Do you see the sunlight that nurtured the tree from which the paper came, the forester who cut the tree down, the steps of the process involved in producing the paper? We inter-are. We are one with everything and are everything.¹³

This is a glimpse, but only a glimpse, of the teachings of the Huayan school of Buddhism, teachings which all of us concerned with the future of our planet would benefit from becoming familiar with.

Notes

1. For introductions to the school, see Cleary (1983), Cook (1977), Hamar (2007a, 2014), Leighton (2006), Poceski (2004), Prince (2014), and Williams (2009). The name Flower Garland suggests it is a highlight of Mahayana thought worth adorning with flowers, a common image in the sutra itself. The Tang dynasty (618-907) was a period of remarkable brilliance and creativity of which Huayan was an expression. For the Flower Ornament Sutra, see the primer of that name in this series. For examples of discussions of Huayan in modern metaphysics and postmodernity, see Odin (1982) and Park (2008).
2. For a sample of the names of Huayan-related commentaries by the five patriarchs, see Cleary (2016); for a sampling of commentaries, see Cleary (1983). It seems that the “profound, dense, and challenging writings [of the patriarchs] were never widely read” by general practitioners (Leighton 2006). The presence of lists of patriarchs in Buddhist schools of thought and practice is a peculiarity of East Asian Buddhism, perhaps a result of the Confucian reverence for ancestors and a means of legitimation in a decidedly foreign and at times hostile cultural setting. For the patriarchs themselves, see Chen (2005, 2007), Chengguan (2014), Gimello (1976), Gregory (2002), and Hamar (2002).
3. Although Huayan did not survive as an identifiable school in China following the purge of Buddhism in 841-845, the school had spread in the late seventh century into Korea and Japan, where it was known as Hwaem and Kegon, respectively. It continues to survive today in Japan, where it is centered at the Todaiji monastery in Nara. Emperor Shōmu, who reigned in Japan between 724 and 749, attempted to rule on the basis of Huayan principles and in the process built Todaiji.
4. More recent commentaries are more likely to be reflections on the patriarchs and their commentaries, rather than on fresh insights into either the *Avatamsaka Sutra* or Mahayana thought itself, at least at a level achieved by the patriarchs. Today the main center of Huayan study and practice is Taiwan in organizations like the Huayen Lotus Society and the Huayen World Community.
5. For the influence of Confucian and Daoist thoughts on Huayan, see Fox (2015:274-280), Hamar (1999), Oh (2000), and Gregory (2002: 255-311). This blending furthered the acculturation of the school to Chinese language assumptions and culture in a process known as sinification.
6. The fourfold dharmadhatu is introduced and elaborated on in “Meditation Perspectives on the Huayan Dharmadhatu,” attributed to Tu-shun, and commentaries on it.
7. Cook (1977), p. 2.
8. Fazang (2014). For useful musings on the “Essay on the Golden Lion,” see Williams (2009:141-144), and on the rafter and the house, see Cook (1977:75-89). The quotation in the paragraph is from Leighton (2006). These metaphors and images are much more intricate and challenging than presented here in brief review. Serious readers should and really must explore them themselves.
9. For a brief but useful review of these conclusions, see Williams (2009:143-144).
10. Gregory (2002: 126-135).
11. Leighton (2006). Miracles are said to have been brought about in East Asian Buddhism by reciting Mahayana sutras. A number of stories of miraculous interventions through reciting the *Avatamsaka Sutra* survive, including those by the hermit monk P’u-an (530-609), who cited the power of the sutra for his being able to freeze to the ground a group of archers who wished to murder him and to raise a dead follower to life. On the magical uses of sutra texts in early Chinese Buddhism, see Campany (1991) and Hamar (2011). On the broader use of magical power by monks, see Chap. 2 in Kieschnick (1997).
12. This and a large number of other verses are in Chapter 11 (Purifying Practice) in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. At one time verses like these were found throughout the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center.
13. Nhat Hanh’s ‘clouds in each paper’ teaching. On the negative side Huayan’s emphasis on the harmonic unity of all things has been used to justify totalitarianism and fascism. For example, the Japanese imperial state in the twentieth century argued it was its duty to unite people in East Asia in this ideal of harmony, even if by force (Ishii 2007).

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