The Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism is part of the Mahayana tradition that examines the metaphysical condition of things. As such, it seeks to explain phenomena as an interpenetration of the universal with the particular, wherein the macrocosm is found contained within the microcosm.

The Huayan school of Buddhist thought is one of the most important interpretations of metaphysics in Chinese and Asian thought. Its name derives from a treatise written by one of the school’s early founders, Fazang (643–712), entitled A Treatise on the Divisions of the One Vehicle Doctrine of Huayan. The term huayan translates the Sanskrit term avatamsaka, meaning “flower garland,” and referring to a sutra (discourse) in which the Buddha relates, for the first time and immediately after his enlightenment, the process through which he attained his enlightened state. In the treatise Fazang fashions a profoundly Sinitic (that is, Chinese) Buddhist metaphysics, which redefines the Indian metaphysics of Buddhism concerning the concept of emptiness.

The larger purpose of Fazang’s treatise is to systematize the diverse range of Buddhist teachings and doctrines that existed in China at the beginning of the Tang period (618–907). This act of classification and standardization was far more complete than the one presented by the Tiantai school in that Fazang addressed the various modes of Buddhist thought that had come into China after the death of Zhiyi. Tiantai is the first true Chinese school of Buddhism, which developed with little influence from India, and which emphasized both meditation and engagement with the world. Zhiyi (538–597) is considered to be the founder of the Tiantai school. These various modes Fazang arranged into five classifications, or the Five Teachings: the Hinayana, which sought to explain phenomenal reality; the Mahayana, which examined the nature of phenomena as well as the Middle Way (which, in turn, describes the universal principle that all reality shares—namely, emptiness); late Mahayana, which elucidated the relationship of the particular to the universal; the Abrupt Teaching with its explication of silence; and lastly the Huayan, or what Fazang called the “Perfect Teaching,” which defined emptiness as the interpenetration of all existence.

Interpenetration

The primary teaching of Huayan is its paradigm of interpenetration; that is, the absolute (or the principle) and the thing (or being) are completely united, so things cannot exist apart from the absolute. The absolute and the particular inform one another, in that each is contained within the other. This means that when a thing is placed within its context and associates with other things, it and they have similarities as well as differences. As a result, each thing perpetually interacts with all other things in a contradictory and harmonious relationship so that when the thing is affirmed, that which is not the thing is negated, and if the thing is negated, that which is not the thing is affirmed. The relationship is an eternal giving and taking;
the filling of a gap, which at the same time creates a gap; the principle and being forever filling each other and emptying into each other. In this way Fazang defines form and emptiness: form is emptiness and emptiness form; the interrelationship of the two is an opposition and at the same time a cooperation, a fulfillment, which leads to endless variations that may be called creation.

Reality, then, is a unity, but also a multiplicity of interacting unities. And reality is complete but also lacking; it needs nothing but also needs everything. Such contradictory reasoning explains the cycle of formulation and dissolution of things: form and content are always unstable and shifting. Such negative assertions, or paradoxical language, calls into question the being of phenomena so that the truth of a thing is recognized—that it may take on a form, yet it is empty of a self; and if there is no self, then there cannot be an origination or an existence. The idea of permanence, therefore, is false, since permanence demands that one thing be static and another fluid. For Fazang, stasis is illusion, since there is only perpetual flux; and this acknowledgement means that truth is both ad hoc and ultimate. Such simultaneous harmony and contradiction is the state of all phenomena. Only the enlightened mind can discern this interrelationship of things.

Reasons for Paradoxical Language

The purpose of such paradoxical language is to demonstrate the disparity between the unenlightened mind and the enlightened one. In other words, conventional truth (based as it is in discerning the difference between subject and object) cannot reach ultimate truth, which exists outside this paradigm, since this difference is housed entirely in the interaction of the self with language. Ultimate truth, which Fazang calls “true emptiness,” or “suchness,” may be revealed only to the enlightened mind in sudden bursts of realization; it cannot be known by any conventional, systematic means. The self is entirely bereft of all referents that provide it with sense and meaning; it has become empty. When this state of being, devoid of meaning, comes about (enlightenment), only then is there the possibility that ultimate truth may be known. And Fazang describes ultimate truth as that realization that is empty of all tangible form and is unconditioned in that it is neither subjective nor objective. Ultimate truth is nothing (or emptiness).

Another reason for such paradoxical language is that it seeks to mirror the experience of the self that seeks to
grasp ultimate truth. The self can only know tangible, conditioned forms while ultimate truth is intangible and unconditioned. The self can only know tangible, conditioned forms while ultimate truth is intangible and unconditioned, which brings about a fall into paradox each time the self seeks to comprehend that which it cannot comprehend; for the self to know that which lies outside it, it must rely on objectification—through language, for example. But ultimate truth does not obey the division between the subject and the object, between the inner and the outer. Ultimate truth is both subject and object at once; it is both inner and outer at once. And language cannot express this relationship properly or truthfully.

The only way possible, therefore, is to assert a statement and its immediate denial simultaneously. Ultimate truth is a dilemma that cannot be resolved because even when it becomes revealed to the enlightened mind, the expression of that revelation must be reduced to examples—that is, to objectification or to conceptualization that render the revelation far less than the truth, for they are nothing more than descriptions of the steps toward enlightenment rather than an accurate record of enlightenment. The bond between the thing and the idea is false.

Since ultimate truth is the perpetual interaction of the principle and the phenomena, a relationship in which neither one is lessened nor destroyed, the paradox of the one and the not-one can never be resolved, for reality is always empty. If it were resolvable, then the opportunity for ultimate truth to reveal itself in sudden intuitive bursts would not exist.

The Huayan school was the last flowering of Buddhist thought in China. In the years 841 to 845, there was a massive suppression of the new faith. However, the influence of the Huayan school was far ranging, for it became the founding doctrine of all the subsequent East Asian Buddhist schools, such as Zen Buddhism.

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Further Reading


