The first truly Chinese school of Buddhist thought, Tiantai, was founded in the sixth century. With its Chinese perspective on an Indian religion, Tiantai spread through East Asia, establishing itself in Japan and Korea.

Geographically, Tiantai refers to a mountain as well as a mountain range in Zhejiang Province; historically, this mountain became home to a school of thought that came to revolutionize Buddhism in China, imbuing it with a uniquely Sinic approach that broke away from a continued dependence upon India as the place of authority for all things Buddhist. Therefore, Tiantai philosophy gave the Far East (China as well as Japan and Korea) its own form of Buddhism.

The infiltration of Buddhism into China depended on the sporadic appearance of texts and traditions retrieved by travelers to India. Consequently, the result was a plethora of teaching and practices that were both divergent and even at times contradictory. For example, some prescribed strict observance of rituals, others denied such practices entirely. More importantly, however, the Chinese worldview was most unlike the Indian Buddhist one, for the former gave eminence to the development and nurturing of the individual and the body while the Indian view regarded the body and the person as only a brief illusion. In effect, China was strongly Confucian and Daoist; that is, Chinese culture was intensely “humanistic,” concerned with understanding how to live in the world and how to achieve a just society through good governance. Buddhism, on the other hand, was antihumanistic; for it cared for neither of these things and privileged the search for nonexistence as the chief end of human existence: The body was a barrier that needed to be overcome in order for the soul to be free from suffering. Thus, the real source of the varieties and disparities of Buddhism in China was the result not only of divergent texts, but also of divergent cultures. China was not northern India, and the process of inculcating Buddhism was not simply a matter of transplanting what had worked in India and Central Asia. The process of translation of an entire worldview required the creation of a new set of ideas and ideals. Indeed, translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also a philosophical one.

It was the monk and philosopher Zhiyi (538–597 CE), who came to a Buddhist retreat at Tiantai Mountain around the year 587 and began to address the twin problems facing Buddhism this far from its place of origin: First, how to make the faith relevant to China, and second, how to synthesize and unify Buddhist teachings so there would not be confusion and disparity.

The immediate need was for synthesis, and Zhiyi took an innovative approach. Rather than seeking to refute each and every text that contradicted another, he instead provided a methodology to understand the contradictions, and he did not deny that the Buddha himself was the source of these contradictions. In this way, Zhiyi avoided creating conflict among the various followers of these contradictory traditions, each of whom believed in the verity of what they taught and practiced. He stated that the various approaches, texts, and scriptures found in the China of his time were certainly teachings of the
Buddha, but they were only partial ones, because over his lifetime the Buddha realized that a person could not encompass the entirety of the enlightenment process in one attempt; rather she or he had to achieve this state gradually. Therefore, each of the many teachings and texts that appeared contradictory were in fact small steps towards enlightenment; or in the words of his famous dictum, “All was One, and One was All.” In effect, the model he used was that of the student who proceeds from an initial, preparatory stage, to a beginning stage, to a middle stage, and finally to an advanced one. The many teachings represented each of these stages, and each was important for it brought the student to the highest, most accomplished state. Once this highest state was reached, the student had no more need for the other stages. Thus, each stage was utilitarian and not complete in itself. Accordingly, the many teachings would ultimately be abandoned once they had fulfilled their function. Truth, implied Zhiyi, is revealed a little at a time; once it is known in its fullness, partiality or semi-concealment is no longer possible. For example, the experience of reading a book for the first time can only be undertaken once, page at a time. Once the book is entirely read, nothing remains hidden. This is what Tiantai philosophy refers to as “Round Teachings,” or that approach which encompasses everything so there is no room for contradiction or conflict.

For Zhiyi, the highest state of all was explained in one text only, the Lotus Sutra, which is a very significant Mahayana sutra that takes the form of a dialog with the Buddha and which consists of parables that seek to explain skillful means, or those skills through which an individual may terminate suffering and also acquire the ability to teach others in the path of the Buddha. It became the central work for Tiantai philosophy. The purpose of this suta is to expound on the nature and purpose of those means that will allow a person to reach the highest state, that is, the end of personal suffering. Importantly for Zhiyi, the sutra also hints at the notion that the teaching found in it replaces all other Buddhist teachings. This brought authority to Zhiyi’s notion of the various stages.

Further, Zhiyi gave precision to the definition of phenomena, or, things that are observed. He saw their nature as threefold: Things are empty because they contain nothing intrinsically their own; things exist solely because they are the result of external causes and are therefore impermanent; and things are middle, meaning that things are both empty and temporary, and thus their true reality is ultimately unknowable. This epistemology led Zhiyi to conclude that each phenomenon is one with true emptiness (the state of being devoid of absolute identity, the complete lack of permanence, the entire erasure of the self). And on a more pragmatic level, he found room for all activity; even deluded thoughts are initial, preparatory steps towards achieving enlightenment. This guided Zhiyi to formulate various methods of contemplation or meditation to allow the individual to observe his or her mind in order to continue climbing upwards into enlightenment.

This approach makes Tiantai philosophy uniquely Chinese and forever ruptures its connection to India. By equating things to provisional instances of enlightenment, the phenomenal world acquires significance and this in turn leads to a uniquely Chinese Buddhist position: The erasure of the self is not self-negation but the acquisition of bliss, permanence, and purity. Perhaps it may even be said that in China the purpose of meditation is to confront the world and seek to solve its problems because the process is a step towards enlightenment. This broadening of perspective allowed Buddhism to extend easily throughout China and into Japan and Korea. Tiantai is still important in China, but in Korea and Japan it has lost its Chinese perspective and has been made more indigenous, such as Nichiren Buddhism in Japan.

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Further Reading
From the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra is by far the most popular and influential of Mahayana scriptures. This excerpt translated by Kumarajiva in 406 CE illustrates one of the main doctrines of the text: that the Lotus Sutra itself embodies the Buddha’s truth.

At that time Sakyamuni Buddha saw the Buddhas that were his emanations all assembled, each sitting on a lion seat, and heard all these Buddhas say that they wished to participate in the opening of the treasure tower . . .

Sakyamuni Buddha with the fingers of his right hand then opened the door of the tower of seven treasures. A loud sound issued from it, like the sound of a lock and crossbar being removed from a great city gate, and at once all the members of the assembly caught sight of Many Treasures Thus Come One seated on a lion seat inside the treasure tower, his body whole and unimpaired, sitting as though engaged in meditation. And they heard him say, “Excellent, excellent, Sakyamuni Buddha! You have preached this Lotus Sutra in a spirited manner. I have come here in order that I may here this sutra.

At that time the four kinds of believers, observing the Buddha who had passed into extinction immeasurable thousands, ten thousands, millions of kalpas in the past speaking in this way, marveled at what they had never known before and took the masses of heavenly jeweled flowers and scattered them over Many Treasures Buddha and Sakyamuni Buddha.


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