

Emptiness, Identity and Interpenetration in Hua-yen Buddhism

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Hua-yen represents one of the most sophisticated attempts in Buddhist intellectual history to explain the nature of reality. Its vision of existence, in contrast to the mainstream Western intellectual tradition, sees the universe as an infinite network of entities that acquire their particular existences through each other. Because their particular existences are inter-causally generated, in-and-of-themselves they are non-existent, which is to say that, in Buddhist terms, they are empty (*sunya*). Since no one particular locus is the absolute cause of all phenomena, any and every locus is the primary and central cause of all phenomena. As such, every entity causally contains every other entity. This idea is most vividly depicted in the Buddhist metaphor of the Jewel Net of Indra—a vast net on which a spherical, crystal clear jewel is tied on each mesh, so that each jewel reflects the entire net (the whole) and each individual jewel (the part), which itself reflects the whole and the parts. This metaphor succinctly captures the Hua-yen notion of *emptiness* (exemplified by the crystal clarity of the jewels), *identity* (exemplified by the sameness of the jewels) and *interpenetration* (exemplified by the infinite reflections in the jewels).

This article attempts to explain the inner logic of Hua-yen¹ philosophy and its holistic vision of existence from the perspective of the school

¹ The Chinese term “Hua-yen” literally means “flower decoration,” “ornament” or “garland.” The name is derived from the title of a Mahayana text, *The Garland Sutra*, (*Avatamsaka Sutra*), which is the school’s main source of doctrine. According to tradition, the Buddha delivered this *Sutra* immediately following his enlightenment under the Bo tree. See Garma Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hua Yen Buddhism* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), ix, 251. See also note 35 below.

itself. With this in mind, it has been divided into three broad sections. (I) It begins by examining the early Mahayana notion of emptiness (*śūnyata*), and then, the particular manner in which Hua-yen thinkers re-conceptualised this pivotal Buddhist concept. (II) Then it proceeds to analyse the nature of identity and interpenetration. First it looks into the relationship between emptiness (the absolute) and interdependent origination (phenomena), and then, the relationship between phenomenal entities themselves. This section relies heavily on metaphors found in Hua-yen texts, the purpose of which is to illustrate, through concrete examples, the rationale behind a *weltanschauung* that is difficult to conceptualise at the level of abstraction. (III) Finally, the article highlights the central place that direct experience occupies in Hua-yen epistemology. This is followed by a concluding overview of the relation between enlightenment and universal compassion.

Emptiness (*Sunyata*)²

Early Indian Mahayana Notions of Emptiness

Francis Cook points out in that the phrase “everything is empty” (*sarvan sunyam*) first appeared in India in a collection of Buddhist scriptures known as the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*prajnaparamita*), authored approximately 350 years after the death of the Buddha. However, Cook goes on to argue, it is quite possible that this concept existed in the earliest period of Buddhist intellectual history and only later acquired prominence.³ Despite the uncertainty surrounding its exact origin, the doctrine of emptiness serves as the fundamental cornerstone of Mahayana Buddhism, and by extension, its Hua-yen branch.

The first Buddhist to systematically explicate the meaning of emptiness was the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (2nd/3rd century CE),⁴ who, through rigorous analysis, dissected phenomena to reveal that nothing

² *Sunyata* (Chinese: *k'ung hsin*) can also be translated as “voidness,” or the “void” (Chang, 61, 254); “openness,” (Nancy McCagney, *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* [New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997], xix-xx); and “transparency” (Roger Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism* [New York: Paragon Books, 1989], 20-21).

³ Francis Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1977), 37.

⁴ For a good overview of Western scholarship on the historical Nagarjuna, see “Locating Nagarjuna,” the second chapter of Joseph Walser’s *Nagarjuna in Context: Mahayana Buddhism in Early Indian Culture* (New York: Columbia, 2005).

possesses inherent existence or self-essence.⁵ So rigorous was his logic that a whole school, the Madhyamaka, was founded on the basis of his arguments.⁶ The philosophical position Nagarjuna advocated, which denies the ontological reality of essences, remains one of the most complicated and intriguing features of Buddhist thought. We can perhaps better understand the rationale behind this denial of self-essences by resorting to a simple example of a fully grown oak tree. As it stands, the oak tree is an oak tree. If, however, we were to pluck out all of the leaves of this oak tree, would it still be a tree? Most people would definitely say yes. Trees lose their leaves in the winter all the time yet still remain trees. Suppose now that we were to saw off a few branches. Would our tree still remain a tree? Most people, again, would respond in the affirmative. We have all seen trees without a few branches. But let us say that we were to take another step and cut off all of the branches. What would we be left with? Now the response we would most likely get would be a trunk on a root, definitely not a tree. The point of this analogy is to illustrate that once any existent is subjected to thorough analysis, we soon realise that its nature is not fixed and determinate. In the case of the tree, this becomes clear when we ask: exactly when in our process of sawing off the branches does the tree stop being a tree? The difficulty in pin-pointing a universal essence which we can unequivocally identify as “treeness” is one reason for believing there is no such essence to begin with. For Nagarjuna, this implies that what we take to be things that exist in their own right are actually empty in themselves, no more than conglomerations of specific conditions, which, in the case of the tree, consists of the coming together of a root, trunk, branches and leaves. From this perspective, phenomena are differentiated by a mind that has an inherent tendency to mentally break apart the objects of existence. The mind perceives, or more accurately, projects objects to be things they are not in-and-of-themselves.

⁵ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 60-61.

⁶ Gadjin Nagao, *The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy*, trans. John P. Keenan (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1. Walser disagrees with this generally accepted view when he writes, “Nagarjuna appears to have been not so much a founder of a specific school of philosophy as a champion of Mahayana more generally.” See Walser, 3.

One of the presuppositions of Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka school is that if things did have inherent existence, the more they would be scrutinised, the clearer they would become. But as the example of the tree shows, the opposite seems to be the case, namely, the more something is analysed, the vaguer it gets, until it is lost altogether. Paul Williams expresses this point nicely when he writes:

...if x has inherent existence it would be found as either identical with its parts, taken separately or as a collection, or as an inherently existing entity apart from them [...] the letter A, if it inherently exists, is identical either with any one of / \ , or with their shapeless collection, or with a separate entity from them. Clearly it is not found in any of these ways, so it does not inherently exist, that is, it does not exist from its own side.⁷

This is to say that phenomena, from their "own side," are empty. When they are conceptually broken down into their parts, and the components of these parts are themselves broken down, there comes a point in the deconstructive process when all is lost. No fundamental component is found which possesses an independent existence (*svabhava*).

Another reason for the fundamental emptiness of all things lies in the unceasing flux which characterises the phenomenal world. That is to say, there are no fixed, static loci in the world that remain the same while everything else changes, since even the loci are not immutable. The Buddha expressed this view when he said, "the world is a continuous flux and is impermanent".⁸ But such an idea is not peculiar to the Buddhists. Heraclitus echoed it in the Western scientific and philosophical tradition when, characterising existence as a fire, he famously declared "it is not possible to step into the same river twice." This idea also finds its counterpart in classical Islamic thought in the doctrine of the unrepeatability of existence (*la takrar fi al-wujud*).⁹

⁷ Williams, 64.

⁸ Quoted in Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 26.

⁹ For an excellent summary of this in the thought of the 13th century Sufi, Ibn al-'Arabi, see William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 103-112. Chittick very lucidly explores in this short section Ibn al-'Arabi's famous axiom, originally articulated by Abu Talib al-Makki (996 CE) in the *Nourishment of Hearts*, that "self disclosure never repeats itself" (*la takrar fa al-tajalli*). See also Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 200-207. This doctrine was not confined to Ibn al-'Arabi and was held by Sufis, Asharite theologians, and later Islamic philosophers.

For the Mahayana Buddhists, there is no fixed stage upon which the cosmic drama is enacted because the entire cosmos is permeated by a continuity of alterations. Or we could say that the stage is itself a character in the play. Absolutely nothing remains the same for any two successive moments. Since phenomena lack a nature that remains unchanged through the unfolding of time, they are empty. Existence is therefore best characterised not by “being” but “becoming”. Using our previous example of the tree, we might ask, when does the seed become a plant, and when does the plant become a tree? Once again, we encounter obscurities in our attempts to pinpoint the exact natures of “seedness,” “plantness,” and “treeness,” and these obscurities are, for the Buddhists, proof that there are no such natures to begin with.

The concept of emptiness is intricately tied to the first and second noble truths of the Buddha: that existence is *dukkha* (generally translated as “suffering”), and that the root of such *dukkha* is *tanha* (“desire,” “thirst,” “craving”). Put simply, it is because we have desires that we suffer, and this suffering arises when we do not get the things we want. If properly understood, the doctrine of emptiness can help eradicate suffering because it teaches us that there is really nothing to be possessed; since everything is inherently empty, nothing can be truly grasped. Our continuous and unceasing attempts to satiate our hunger by acquiring the objects of our *tanha* are doomed to failure from the very onset. These attempts are like the futile effort of a thirsty man, who, stranded in a desert, runs after a mirage in the hopes of finding water.

But Buddhism goes beyond teaching us that our objects of desire are empty. It claims that even the desirer is empty. The 4th century Theravadin Buddhist, Buddhaghosa, expressed this view when he stated in no uncertain terms that “mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found”.¹⁰ What this means in the context of Mahayana is that the claim “everything is empty” applies equally to the human self, which we have a natural propensity to think of as an independently existing entity every time any one of us says “I”. But how is the self empty? To understand this emptiness, we need simply to analyse the self the same way we did the oak tree earlier. We cannot say the self is the body because the body is unconscious, as Descartes also claimed. And if we say that it is the mind, then which particular state of the mind is it? The mind undergoes a

¹⁰ Rahula, 26.

myriad of states from its birth to its death. Yesterday I was happy, today I am depressed, and tomorrow I may be overjoyed. Which of these states represents the real me? It cannot be all of them, nor can I single out one of them. Perhaps it is something that lies behind the mental states, the locus upon which the mental fluctuations occur. But if this were the case, how could I know it at all, since it would be distinct from my thoughts? On what basis would I be able to convincingly postulate that such a thing existed in the first place? According to Mahayana, I have no real reason for such a postulation.

Even though both the phenomenal world and the self are empty, it should be clarified that Mahayana does in fact acknowledge the value of our everyday, common sense understanding of the world, and the important role this understanding plays in our daily affairs. That phenomena are empty does not mean they cannot affect us. What Mahayana intends by the doctrine of emptiness is to expose the real nature of things. The difference between conventional truth and ultimate truth is not simply based on two different ways of looking at things, since ultimate truth is actually the way things are.¹¹ The importance of Mahayana's acknowledgement of the common sense understanding of the world lies in the fact that without it, we could not understand the real nature of things and attain genuine enlightenment. And so Nagarjuna writes:

The doctrine of the Buddhas is taught with reference to two truths—conventional truth (*lokasamvrtisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*). Those who do not understand the difference between these two truths do not understand the profound essence (*tattva*) of the doctrine of the Buddha. Without dependence on everyday practice the ultimate is not taught. Without resorting to the ultimate *nirvana* is not attained. If emptiness is coherent then all is coherent. If emptiness is not coherent then likewise all is not coherent.¹²

The key to understanding the ultimate nature of reality lies in *correctly* understanding emptiness, as Nagarjuna's final words indicate, otherwise "all is not coherent". It is here that a crucial distinction must be drawn between nihilism and emptiness. The emptiness of phenomena does not imply that nothing exists at all on any level, or that there are no ethical values one should abide by.¹³ This misunderstanding of emptiness denigrates the significance of the doctrine. To those who make

¹¹ Nagao, 21-33, 73-85; Williams, 72.

¹² Quoted in Williams, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

such a mistake, Nagarjuna writes: "You understand neither the object of emptiness, nor emptiness itself, nor the meaning of emptiness".¹⁴ It was such a misunderstanding that led some Western thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to equate emptiness with nihilism and erroneously characterise Buddhism as an inherently pessimistic religion.¹⁵ Likewise, it should be made clear the emptiness is not a *thing* either, especially not something to be grasped as a refuge from human suffering. From this point of view, it is also an error to equate emptiness with *common* notions of divinity,¹⁶ since emptiness is not

¹⁴ Quoted in Cook, *Jewel*, 38.

¹⁵ Two examples from Nietzsche shall suffice to demonstrate this point. In the *Gay Science* he writes, "*Pessimists as victims*. – Wherever a deep discontent with existence becomes prevalent, it is the after effect of some great dietary mistake made by a whole people over a long period of time that are coming to light. Thus the *spread* of Buddhism (*not its origin*) depended heavily on the excessive reliance of the Indians on rice which led a general loss of vigour." See *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix in Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 134. And in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he writes: "whoever has really with an Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye, looked into the, down into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking – beyond good and evil no longer, like the Buddha and Schopenhauer...". See *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 56.

¹⁶ In many ways *sunyata* bears an uncanny resemblance to the impersonal divine essence of the monotheistic religions — what Frithjof Schuon refers to as the supra-ontological "Beyond Being", or what Meister Eckhart calls the "God beyond God". This ineffable reality is to be distinguished from the personal God or "God of created beliefs" which one encounters in exoteric monotheism. For a survey of apophatic descriptions of the former, primarily in Christianity and Islam, see the pertinent sections in Michael Sells's *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For Ibn al-'Arabi and his school not only is the impersonal divine essence an eternal mystery, it also paradoxically permeates all of existence. The 19th century Akbarian Sufi, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, expresses this idea in a manner that seems to echo certain key Hua-yen motifs: "there is not a divine Essence on the one hand; and, on the other, essences proper to creatures... There is nothing other than the divine Essence which, without multiplying or dividing, is the essence of creatures, and reciprocally, the essences of creatures are identical to the divine Essence. This does not mean that God has His Essence and that creatures have their own essence and that the divine Essence unites itself with them, or mixes with them, or infuses itself in them... Rather I mean that His Essence... is the essence of creatures". See Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of 'Abd al-Kader*, trans. J. Chrestensen and T. Manning, et al. (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 81-83.

a deity in the conventional sense of the term.¹⁷ Instead emptiness is the complete absence of inherent existence. It was for this reason that Nagarjuna opposed all attempts to hypostasize or reify emptiness, since by doing so one would be delimiting emptiness. The impossibility of reifying emptiness lies, for Nagarjuna, ultimately in the very emptiness of emptiness (*sunyatasunyata*).¹⁸

“Buddhists have been wary of a practice which led to a final attachment to emptiness,” writes Cook, “and it has been said that such an attachment is so destructive that it is better for a person to be attached to the concept of *atman* [self] than to that of emptiness”.¹⁹ Instead of transforming it into an object of worship, Mahayana Buddhists have sought to use *sunyata* as an iconoclastic hammer to destroy all false views. This is why Nagarjuna considers emptiness an antidote for the sickness of misguided beliefs (*dristis*).²⁰ But antidotes must be taken with caution. The careless consumption of medicine more often exacerbates a sickness instead of curing it. Nagarjuna goes so far as to say that the danger inherent in misapprehending emptiness is so severe that it is like carelessly grasping a venomous snake.²¹ Only those who correctly understand emptiness can ever hope to attain enlightenment.

Now it might be asked here, cannot the claim, “everything is empty”, apply to Nagarjuna’s argument as well? Or as the contemporary philosopher Arindam Chakrabarti cleverly asks, “Isn’t the Voidist yelling ‘Don’t yell?’”²² To this criticism Nagarjuna does furnish a response: he simply replies that even though his own thesis is empty, it does not lack refutative force. This is why he can claim not to have a thesis and yet still

¹⁷ Schuon prefers to characterize the Buddhist perspective as “non-theistic.” His intention in doing so is to distinguish the viewpoint in question from “atheism”, which Buddhism certainly does not espouse except in certain popular Western forms. It becomes quickly apparent to any student of Buddhism that the tradition rests, as all major religious traditions do, on a doctrine of the Absolute and the relative, even though the Absolute is conceptualized in a form that is uniquely distinctive to this religious form. For Schuon’s insightful observations on this question, see *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993), 21-23.

¹⁸ Williams, 63.

¹⁹ Cook, *Jewel*, 39.

²⁰ Williams, 62.

²¹ Cook, *Jewel*, 40.

²² Chakrabarti, Arindam. “Nagarjuna,” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 601.

be critical of all them.²³ From this point of view, we might conceive of emptiness as an intellectually sophisticated bomb, one which destroys everything including itself to allow for the emergence of a correct understanding which is in fact aconceptual, unattached to any particular *drsti* or false view. Nagarjuna writes, “If I had a view I could have a flaw, but, emptied of all views, I am flawless”.²⁴

On account of the all-pervasiveness of emptiness, Mahayana contends that the Buddha’s four noble truths, ignorance, the elimination of ignorance, and *nirvana* are all equally empty. The truly enlightened person is he who, fully comprehending emptiness, attains this “nothing-to-be-obtained”, which is *nirvana*.²⁵ Despite the apparently self-contradictory nature of this doctrine, it must be kept in mind that only when the tendency to grasp—materially, emotionally, conceptually—is *completely* cut off does one attain *nirvana*. Enlightenment is simply the existential realisation that there is nothing to be attained and no one to attain it.

Before closing our brief overview of emptiness, a few words should be said about another Indian concept closely tied in to emptiness, and which, along with it, serves as a conceptual cornerstone for Hua-yen thought.²⁶ Here I am referring specifically to the idea of the *tathagatagarbha*, the “womb of the Buddhahood”. Early Mahayana espoused a doctrine according to which there is an element within all beings that will insure their final liberation. The doctrine of *tathagatagarbha* allows one to recognise that the ultimate goal of the religious path should not be sought externally. As the Scripture states: “all beings are the wombs of the Buddhahood”.²⁷ Since moral and intellectual faults prevent one from realising enlightenment, the doctrine is also an exhortation towards self-purification. It is an *upaya*, a skilful means to guide humans towards final liberation. The relation between *tathagatagarbha* and emptiness lies in the fact that the latter expresses more an ontological view of reality, whereas the former, at least in Indian thought, expresses a soteriological doctrine pertaining to the end-goal of enlightenment.

²³ Williams, 64.

²⁴ Quoted in Chakrabarti, “Buddhist Philosophy,” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 109.

²⁵ Cook, *Jewel*, 37.

²⁶ Cook, *Ibid*, 45. See also Robert M. Gimello, “Huayan,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6:4145-6.

²⁷ Quoted in Cook, *Jewel*, 45.

But this enlightenment is nothing but the experience of reality in its emptiness mode. Consequently, *tathagatagarbha* is partially addressed to unenlightened beings pursuing enlightenment.

Hua-yen, as we shall see in greater detail, holds to a slightly modified version of the Indian doctrine of *tathagatagarbha*. According to the Chinese thinkers, all beings, rather than possessing a seed-potential of the Buddhahood, already possess a fully sprouted Buddha-nature.²⁸ Such a subtle modification aligns Hua-yen thought, from its own point of view, more consistently with the notion outlined earlier that nothing is to be attained. The particular Hua-yen approach to *tathagatagarbha* lifts it from a soteriological doctrine to a cosmological and ontological one; it implies that the womb of the Buddhahood and Buddhahood are, through interpenetration, one and the same.

Hua-yen Developments of the Indian Understanding of Sunyata

Having examined the nature of emptiness, we are now in a better position to understand the Hua-yen conception of the universe, which, as Cook contends, “is an elaborate reworking of the Indian concept of emptiness”.²⁹ For the remainder of this article we shall explore the particular manner in which the Chinese Hua-thinkers ingeniously re-envisioned and further built upon prior Indian Mahayana notions of *sunyata*.

It was noted earlier that emptiness is not nihilism, annihilationism, or the view that nothing exists, and that, on the contrary, it signifies that what does exist, exists as merely an appearance without self-existence. This apparent existence arises from the inter-causal relationality of phenomena. And so Nagarjuna writes: “It is interdependent origination that we call emptiness”.³⁰ We shall begin to see, through the course of some illustrations, the importance that an awareness of the identity of emptiness and interdependent origination plays in fully comprehending the Hua-yen worldview.

By the time of Chih-yen (d. 668) and Fa-tsang (d. 712),³¹ the second and third patriarchs of Hua-yen, the Chinese Buddhists had an accurate

²⁸ Cook, *Jewel*, 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰ Quoted in Williams, 61.

³¹ Fa-tsang is considered to be the most important master of Hua-yen. See Chang, 197.

understanding of emptiness, and creatively reworked the doctrine to make it accord with the more positive Chinese way of looking at things. The notion of emptiness in Indian Buddhism tended to present existence negatively, and this often led to an assessment of the natural world as loathsome or undesirable. This was expected, to a certain extent, since enlightenment entailed liberation from attachments to the natural, everyday world. However, the idea of interdependent origination, which, although it signified the same reality as emptiness, had a more positive ring to it. Chinese Buddhists were able to capitalise on this fact and thereby integrate Indian Mahayana Buddhism into the Chinese intellectual landscape more easily. Cook observes this when he writes the following:

The Chinese chose to emphasise the point that *emptiness is interdependence*. But interdependence is also emptiness, and even for the Chinese the fact of emptiness functioned as a way of criticising the common mode of experience, thus devaluing it, so that this aspect was not ignored. But what is evident in the Hua-yen texts is that simultaneously as the empty mode of perception abolished clinging to the concept of substances of selves, there emerged from the new mode of experience a very positive appreciation for the way in which things related to each other in identity and interdependence. This is what seems to be lacking in the Indian literature. The genius of the Chinese lay in their ability to interpret emptiness in a positive manner without hypostasizing emptiness, without falling into the error of even greater attachment to the world.³²

A similar sentiment regarding the more positive view of emptiness by the Chinese Buddhists is echoed by Robert Gimello:

Whereas it is more typical of earlier Buddhism to employ negative, 'neither/nor' phrasing to express this teaching [of emptiness and dependent origination] and its corollaries, Hua-yen favoured more affirmative locutions, even if they required figurative rather than literal language.³³

The shift from a negative to a more positive view of emptiness—the result of a synthesis of Chinese and Indian thought—raised, what some might consider, Chinese Buddhist thought to a higher level

³² Cook, *Jewel*, 48.

³³ Gimello, 4147.

of sophistication than its Indian counterpart.³⁴ This was at least the view of Hua-yen, which saw itself as the culmination of the Buddhist intellectual tradition, embodying the deepest and most profound teachings the Buddha, teachings which the other Indian schools had not fully grasped.³⁵ For this reason, Hua-yen thinkers referred to its own foundational collection of texts, from which it derived its worldview, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, (lit., the “Flower Ornament” sutra, translated into Chinese as “Hua-yen”),³⁶ as the “king of sutras”.³⁷

Identity and Interpenetration in Hua-yen

We have seen that existence refers to the fact that entities exist as a result of causal conditions, and that emptiness, on the other hand, refers to the fact that what exists remains dependent on causal conditions that lack self-existence. This particular bifurcation of reality into two realms, existence and emptiness, was respectively designated by Hua-yen thinkers as *shih* and *li*. Both of these were standard philosophical terms in Chinese philosophy.³⁸ Along with these two dimensions of

³⁴ The synthesis was possible because of certain significant parallels between Indian and Chinese (particularly Taoist and Neo-taoist) thought, which eased the integration of Indian Buddhism into China. For example, Neo-taoism held that the Tao was not ontologically distinct from the phenomenal world, but simply the way things are, which is to say, their harmonious and balanced state of equilibrium. Such a view of the Tao bore a striking resemblance to emptiness as interdependent origination. See Williams 131; Cook, *Jewel*, 48. Another significant parallel lay in the Taoist view that the natural world is characterised by constant transformation, and the Indian view that existence is a flux. See Francis Cook, “Causation in the Chinese Hua-yen Tradition,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6 (1979): 370.

³⁵ Fa-Tsang, *Treatise on the Golden Lion*. In *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 410. Garma Chang also holds to this view as he makes clear in his preface. See Chang, ix.

³⁶ Fa-tsang, the third patriarch, provides his own explanation for the meaning of the name, “flower ornament,” and its relation to the Hua-yen worldview. The “flower,” he says, “has the function of producing the fruit and action has the power to effect results.” Thus, he likens the “flower” to the generative spiritual force that leads to proper conduct and understanding. This seems to be his intended meaning because he then says that “‘ornament’ means the accomplishment of practice, fulfilment of the result, meeting with the truth and according with reality.” In this sense “flower” refers to the actions that lay the seeds for enlightenment, which is the “ornament.” In the end, “nature’ and ‘characteristics’ both vanish, subject and object are both obliterated - it shines clearly revealed and is thus called an ornament.” See Fa-tsang, *Return*, 153.

³⁷ Heinrich Dumolín, *Zen Buddhism: A History. India and China*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 1:46.

³⁸ Williams, 130.

reality, Hua-yen also emphasised another two: (a) the non-interference of *li* and *shih*, and (b) the non-interference of entities within the realm of *shih*. On account of this four-fold stratification, the “dialectic of Hua-yen philosophy,” Thomas Cleary poignantly observes, “is consummated in the doctrine of the four realms of reality”.³⁹ According to this four-fold classification, existence and emptiness are one, and all phenomenal entities are also one. However, this oneness or unity is only truly apprehended by an enlightened mind. Hua-yen philosophy attempts to explicate the dialectical relationship between these four reality-realms to aid those who do not already see this unity themselves.

Identity and Interpenetration of Emptiness and Phenomena

The doctrine of the identity of *li* and *shih* is essentially the same as the notion brought up in the *Perfection of Wisdom*, that “emptiness is form” (*rupam sunyata*) and “form is emptiness” (*sunyataiva rupam*).⁴⁰ So integral is the relationship between these two aspects of reality—*li* and *shih*—to Hua-yen philosophy, that one might accurately describe the entire corpus of Hua-yen writings as essentially a discussion of these two realms and their non-dual relationship.⁴¹

We have seen that the relational mode between entities is itself emptiness. This refers to the fact that form is emptiness. We have also seen that emptiness expresses itself in the phenomenal mode of beings through interdependent origination. This refers to the fact that emptiness is form. When it is said that emptiness is form, we might say that we are stressing the disclosure of emptiness through the arising of phenomena. When it is said that form is emptiness, we are tracing phenomena back to their real nature, which is emptiness.

Although the interpenetration of *li* and *shih* as an abstract concept may appear difficult to grasp, we can understand this complex relationship between phenomenal forms and the absolute (*sunyata*) through the analogy of the statue of a golden lion. This is the example Fa-tsang used to help Empress Wu understand the interrelationship between *li* and *shih*, puzzled, as she was, by their non-duality. In this metaphor,

³⁹ Thomas Cleary (trans. and ed.), “Introduction,” *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Iowa Press, 1983), 24.

⁴⁰ Cook, *Jewel*, 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Fa-tsang says that the gold of the lion represents *li*, while the shape of the lion represents *shih*. He writes:

Clarifying the fact that things arise through causation: It means that gold has no nature of its own. As a result of the conditioning of the skilful craftsman, the character of the lion consequently arises. This arising is purely due to causes. Therefore it is called arising through causation.⁴²

From this passage it can be gathered that emptiness (the gold of the lion) is disclosed through the interdependent origination of phenomena (the character of the lion). Emptiness has no nature of its own (natureless gold) because emptiness itself is empty, (since gold in itself has no shape). The shape of the lion represents the entirety of interdependent origination, which is the whole. The interdependent causes that generate phenomena are the “skilful craftsman”. Fa-tsang continues:

If we look at the lion (as lion), there is only the lion and no gold. This means that the lion is manifest while the gold is hidden. If we look at the gold, there is only the gold and no lion. This means that the gold is manifest while the lion is hidden.⁴³

From this we gather that, from one point of view, there are only phenomena (when we look at the lion qua lion) and no emptiness. This view sees phenomena as true and emptiness as false. From another point of view, phenomena are unreal, (since there is no lion at all, only gold). This perspective emphasizes the truth of emptiness and the falsity of phenomena. When, however, we combine both of the perspectives, *li* and *shih* overlap, and true and false come together. “If we look at them both,” writes Fa-tsang, “then both are manifest and both hidden. Being hidden, they are secret, and being manifest, they are evident”.⁴⁴ The reason that the lion and the gold may be either hidden or manifest is because “neither has self-nature”.⁴⁵ So emptiness can be hidden while phenomena are revealed, and phenomena can be hidden while emptiness is revealed. This inter-changeability is possible because both *li* and *shih* are without self-nature. Emptiness is empty, form is empty, and form is emptiness. However, even though the gold and its shape are intrinsically unified they are amenable to conceptual separation. In the example

⁴² Fa-tsang, *Lion*, 409.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 412-413.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 413.

of the golden lion, the unenlightened individual's encounter with the phenomenal world is comparable to one who sees the statue and only notices the lion-shape. This is because he does not see the underlying emptiness of forms. Thus, "the lion is spoken of in order to show the meaning of ignorance". The gold, on the other hand, "is spoken of in order to make sufficiently clear the true nature," which is emptiness.⁴⁶ Since, however, gold is inseparable from the shape it takes, it is clear that enlightenment does not entail an encounter with reified gold, but rather, an awareness of the integral unity of emptiness and phenomena. This is why the metaphor of the golden lion successfully demonstrates the integral unity of *sunyata* and phenomena.

The unity of *li* and *shih* as illustrated in Fa-tsang's example of the golden lion is more abstractly expressed by Tu-shun, in a passage from his *Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of the Hua-yen*:

Non-duality means that conditionally originated things seem to exist but are empty [read: form is emptiness]. This emptiness is not vacuity but turns out to be existence [read: emptiness is form]. Existence and emptiness are non-dual; they are completely merged in one place. Here the two views (of existence and non-existence) disappear, and emptiness and existence have no interference (since both are one). Why? Because reality and falsehood reflect each other and completely contain and penetrate each other. What does this mean? Emptiness is emptiness which does not interfere with existence; it is empty yet always existent. Existence is existence which does not interfere with emptiness; it exists yet is always empty. Therefore emptiness is not existent—it is apart from hypostasized existence; emptiness is not empty—it is apart from nihilistic emptiness. Since emptiness and existence merge into one, with no duality, emptiness and existence do not interfere with each other; since they can take away each other's appearance, both are apart from either extreme.⁴⁷

Like so many Mahayana thinkers, Tu-shun stresses that even though phenomena are empty, reality is not nihilistic, and that, moreover, even though phenomenal forms are, through interdependent origination, real, this reality does not imply eternalism, the opposite of nihilism. The actual truth of things lies between the two extremes of nihilism and eternalism. One must see that the gold and the lion are not separate.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 412.

⁴⁷ Tu-Shun, *Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of the Hua-yen. In Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*, trans and ed. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Iowa Press, 1983), 56-57.

Identity and Interpenetration of Phenomena

Having illustrated the interpenetration of *li* and *shih*, we shall now explore the fourth reality-realm: the non-interference of phenomena with phenomena. This refers to the fact that each entity causes and contains each and every other entity, as well as the totality of those entities put together. That is to say, each entity causes and contains both every individual part of reality and the whole of reality. The doctrine implies that not only can one find the entire desert contained in a grain of sand, but that any one grain can be seen as the cause for the existence of reality in its entirety, which, in Hua-yen, is infinite in expanse.⁴⁸ This particular aspect of Hua-yen, on the surface, seems to directly contradict what seems obvious to most of us, namely, that phenomenal entities are separate and distinct objects that cannot possibly interpenetrate or contain each other, or that they cannot be the causes of phenomena they clearly have no relation to. But it should be recalled that what we consider to be obvious is really nothing more than a common sense, conventional understanding of the way things are, and Hua-yen attempts to unravel our conventional understanding of things to expose their real natures.

We shall now examine phenomenal interpenetration on the basis of primarily three analogies brought up in Hua-yen literature: (i) Cheng-kuan's (d. 820) use of Tu-shun's (d. 640) example of the ten mirrors, (ii) Chih-yen's example of number, and (iii) Fa-tsang's example of a rafter and a building. Although the full details of each analogy will be not probed, the purpose of employing these three different metaphors is to present the idea of phenomenal interpenetration and intercausality from different angles. This is because no one analogy fully captures the idea of the identity and interpenetration of phenomena.

(i) Cheng-kuan's Example of the Ten Mirrors

In the *Mirror of Mysteries*, Cheng-kuan writes:

If we use the example of the ten mirrors (arrayed in a circle or sphere so that all face all the others) as a simile [for phenomenal interpenetration], one mirror is the one, nine mirrors are the many [...] one mirror includes in it reflections of nine mirrors, meaning that one mirror is that which includes and nine mirrors are that which is included—

⁴⁸ Fa-tsang, *Cultivation of Contemplation of the Inner Meaning of the Hua-yen: The Ending of Delusion and Return to the Source*. In *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Iowa Press, 1983), 152-153.

yet because the nine mirrors also are that which includes (because they contain the reflection of the one mirror), the aforementioned one mirror which includes also enters the nine mirrors, so one mirror enters the nine mirrors.⁴⁹

One mirror's reflection of the nine mirrors illustrates the idea that one entity contains all other entities. Conversely, the reflection of the one mirror in the nine mirrors illustrates the idea that all entities likewise contain the one entity. Thus the metaphor of the mirrors accurately conveys the principle of all-in-one (nine mirrors in the single mirror) and one-in-all (the single mirror in the nine mirrors). The mirror analogy also shows us the principle of one-in-one (any one mirror contains any other mirror), and all-in-all (every mirror contains every other mirror).

The mirror analogy also illustrates the infinite interpenetration of the one and the all. This is so because each mirror reflects not only every other mirror, but also what every other mirror itself reflects. Anyone who has stood in the middle of two mirrors will understand what is being referred to here, namely, the infinite reflections that appear in mirrors facing each other. As Fa-tsang says, "Among the phenomenal characteristics [...] each one again contains the others, includes the others—each contains infinitely multiplied and remultiplied delineations of objects".⁵⁰

One of the shortcomings, however, of the mirror-analogy, and any spatially based analogy for that matter, is that it does not capture the reality of temporal interpenetration. This refers to the fact that each moment contains every other moment. This is important to note because time is also a part of the phenomenal expression of *sunyata*, and is not outside of cosmic interpenetration. "An atom," writes Fa-tsang, "contains the ten directions with no abrogation of great and small; an instant contains the nine time frames, with extension and brevity being simultaneous".⁵¹ The nine time frames are (1-3) the past, present, and future of the present, (4-6) the past, present, and future of the past, and (7-9) the past, present, and future of the future. All moments fluidly interpenetrate since time, like all spatial entities, is empty. Temporal interpenetration does

⁴⁹ Cheng-kuan and Tu Shun, *Mirror of the Mysteries of the Universe of the Hua-yen. In Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*, trans. and ed. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Iowa Press, 1983), 119.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 156.

not dissolve the distinct identities of all the time frames, since “it is like the five fingers making a fist yet not losing fingerhood”.⁵²

Yet another shortcoming of the mirror analogy is that it does not effectively convey the idea of the identity and causal interpenetration of *different* entities, since all the mirrors are the same. To grasp this idea we must turn to another metaphor.

(ii) Chih-yen’s Example of Number

In the *Ten Mysterious Gates*, Chih-yen uses the example of number to explain the nature of identity and interpenetration. Quoting scripture, he writes:

In the book on Bodhisattvas gathering like clouds in the assembly in the Suyama heaven, it says, ‘it is like the principle of counting ten, adding ones up to infinity—all are the original number’.⁵³

This means that each and every number—despite its obvious difference from every other number—is made up of the same counter, which is one. This aspect manifests the principle of one-in-all. By the same token, because all the numbers are brought into being through one, one causally contains them all. This aspect manifests the principle of all-in-one.

Since all numbers are inherently empty, they arise through mutually causal relations with each other. Two-ness comes into being from its relation to oneness, which is its cause. Without one, there can be no two or ten. Two and ten are therefore without self-existence since they depend on one for their numerical identities. At the same time, one and ten also come into being through two, since oneness and ten-ness are generated through relations with two-ness. From this point of view, two causes one and ten, and one and ten are empty in themselves. In actual fact, since one, two and ten are brought into being through mutual relationships with each other, all are causes for each other, and contain each other. Therefore all numbers serve as causes for all other numbers, and causally contain all other numbers. Without any one

⁵² Chih-yen, *Ten Mysterious Gates of the Unitary Vehicle*. In *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*, trans. and ed. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Iowa Press, 1983), 139.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 127

number, the entire numerical system falls apart,⁵⁴ and every number loses its unique distinctiveness.

Question: How is it that if only one is not established, ten is also not established?

Answer: It is like this: if pillars are not a house, then there is no house; if there is a house, there are pillars—so because the pillars are identical to the house, when there is a house, there are pillars. Because one is ten and ten is one, the establishment of one implies the establishment of ten.⁵⁵

The analogy of the pillars and the house reveals the integral, unified vision of Hua-yen. Without pillars (one) there is no house (ten) and without the house there are no pillars; the pillars are the house and the house is the pillars. Without pillars, the house falls apart; without one, ten dissipates.

We can extend this analogy in a way Chih-yen does not, but to which he would probably have no objection, and equate the pillars with all the numbers, and the house with the numerical system. If we suppose that the house is structured so that the house and the pillars are equally dependent on each other, by removing one pillar, the entire house and all the pillars fall. That is to say, if one number is removed, the entire numerical system collapses, and all the numbers lose their particular identities.

Chih-yen concedes that this seemingly illogical conception of number is “not the same as the common sense conceptions”.⁵⁶ He emphasises the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth to draw attention to Hua-yen’s recognition of the difficulties involved in conceptually grasping the notion of interdependent origination.

(iii) The Metaphor of the Rafter and the Building

Another example employed in Hua-yen literature to illustrate the identity of the part and the whole, and the capacity of the part to generate the whole, lies in Fa-tsang’s example of the rafter and the building.

Question: what is the universal? *Answer:* it is the building. *Question:* that is nothing but the various conditions, such as the rafter; what is the building itself? *Answer:* the rafter

⁵⁴ Each number requires every other number because the numerical system exists as a whole or does not exist at all.

⁵⁵ Chih-yen, 128.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

is the building. Why? Because the rafter by itself totally makes the building. If you get rid of the rafter, the building is not formed. When there is a rafter, there is a building.⁵⁷

Although it is difficult to understand how the rafter can, on its own, produce the building, we must recall that emptiness implies interdependent origination. Without one part, the whole cannot be itself. If the rafter is removed, the building is not that particular building anymore. It therefore requires the rafter for it to retain its specific identity. As we saw in the previous analogy of number, the entire numerical system collapses once any number is removed. The case is no different with the rafter and the building. Furthermore, in so far as the rafter functions as the sole causative power behind the construction of the building, it contains the building, and so *is* the building. The rafter can be seen as the sole cause of the building because it integrates the various conditions of the building, such as the nails, planks, and tiles, into itself. The rafter is able to do this because the rafter, the building, and the various entities the rafter integrates are all empty. If the rafter had a fixed nature of “rafterness,” it would be unable to integrate all of the involved entities, since it would, by its own nature, be nothing but a rafter. That is to say, if it had a fixed nature it could not be a cause for the entire building. This point is expressed by Williams in reference to an argument made by the Madhyamaka thinker, Buddhapalita: “If *x* produced *y*, and they are *inherently* distinct entities, then we have no actual explanation of causation, since *x* is equally inherently distinct from *z*.”⁵⁸

Cook provides a useful example to illustrate the phenomenon of an entity’s integration of various conditions. He says that, from one perspective, one can argue that a seed contains a tree, because a tree comes into being out of it. Without the seed there could be no tree. However, the seed by itself does not cause the tree to emerge, since it needs to integrate both the nourishing capacity of the soil and the water along with the heat of the sun in order to produce a plant, which then grows into a tree. Without any of these supporting conditions the seed would simply remain a seed.⁵⁹ We can use this same kind of logic to understand the integration of the various conditions by the rafter in

⁵⁷ Quoted in Cook, *Jewel*, 78.

⁵⁸ Williams, 66.

⁵⁹ Cook, *Jewel*, 68.

its causation of the building, in that without the supporting conditions it would only remain a rafter.

The problem with the analogy of the seed and tree, however, is that causation is not unidirectional. In the case of the rafter and the building, it is not simply the building that is caused by the rafter, but the rafter too is inversely caused by the building. Without the building there is no rafter because “rafterness” is a condition brought about by the relation of a long, rectangular piece of wood to a building. Both the building and the rafter must causally create each other in order for them to acquire their respective identities. If the rafter does not cause the building there is no rafter, and if the building does not cause the rafter there is no building. Since both stand in mutual need of each other for their respective existences, causality is multidirectional. As in the case of Chih-Yen in his analogy of number, Fa-tsang also concedes that these concepts are ultimately “difficult to conceive, and surpass common sense notions”.⁶⁰

(iv) The Cosmic Permeation of Buddhahood

The underlying reason that different entities can be the same through conditioning lies in their fundamental emptiness. That is to say, because of emptiness, phenomena are different through conditional emergence, yet fundamentally the same in nature, which is a “natureless-nature”. Put another way, the identity of phenomena lies in their differences because the differences are without self-nature. But through the all-pervasive absence of this self-nature, differences are dissolved at the groundless level of emptiness. This level is “groundless” because emptiness is not an ontological foundation upon which existence rests.

In so far as emptiness reflects the way things truly are, it is *tathata* or suchness. The Hua-yen Buddhists anthropomorphized it in the figure of Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha. Because emptiness is inseparable from its phenomenal mode of expression through interdependent origination, the cosmic Buddha is also the totality of phenomena and therefore the body of the universe. The cosmic Buddha is transcendent through its absoluteness, (emptiness in itself), and immanent through phenomenal interconditionality, (the disclosure of emptiness). On account of the interpenetration of *li* and *shih*, the Buddha is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Cook, *Jewel*, 82.

This doctrine of the true nature of things as Buddhahood is tied to another doctrine mentioned earlier, that of the “the womb of Buddhahood.” It was pointed out that one of the modifications of this Indian doctrine in the hand of Hua-yen thinkers lay in the transformation of all entities from simply possessing a potential Buddhahood, to being fully realised Buddhas. What this means in the context of our discussion is that since every entity is the Buddha, every entity is the same as every other entity, since they are all Buddhas. Furthermore, each entity, which is a Buddha, is the same as the whole, which is the cosmic Buddha, and the whole cosmic Buddha is the same as each individual Buddha. Due to the infinite cosmic permeation of Buddhahood nothing exists in reality but the Buddha.

Referring to the interpenetration and cosmic permeation of Buddhahood, Cheng-kuan, commenting on Tu-shun’s four propositions—(i) one-in-one, (ii) all-in-one, (iii) one-in-all, (iv) all-in-all—writes:

Now speaking in terms of the Buddha vis-à-vis sentient beings, taking the Buddhas as the all, that which includes and contains, sentient beings would be that which is contained or included and that which is entered. The first proposition would be the Buddhas contain one sentient beings and enter into all sentient beings; in the second, the Buddhas containing all sentient beings, enter into one sentient being; in the third, the bodies of the Buddhas containing one sentient being, enter into the hairs on the bodies of all sentient beings; in the fourth, the Buddhas, each containing all sentient beings, enter into all sentient beings. The relativity of other things, one and many, are also like this.⁶¹

Enlightenment & the Role of the Bodhisattva

Realising the Buddha’s Direct Awareness of the Nature of Things

The significance of speaking of universal interpenetration as the infinite permeation of Buddhahood lies in the Hua-yen understanding of the relationship between philosophy and meditative realisation. It is not in vain that Hua-yen equates *tathata* with Buddhahood, since to fully realise *tathata* once must be a Buddha. To see the infinite permeation and interpenetration of Buddhahood, and to be the Buddha, are one and the same. The reason for this is because there is no difference between knowing and being. Hua-yen’s non-dual ontology affects its understanding of knowledge in that it does not recognise a distinction between what one knows and who one is. This implies that only those

⁶¹ Cheng-kuan, *Mirror*, 121.

who witness reality through the eyes of *prajna* insight are capable of fully appreciating the Hua-yen universe. This helps us better understand why some concepts of Hua-yen might appear so mind-boggling and far-fetched. But Hua-yen is acutely aware of this natural human propensity towards incomprehension. This is why many of the school's thinkers, as we saw, after explaining an obscure or counter-intuitive point of doctrine, concede that this is not the common sense view, but the ultimate truth of things.

It is important to bear in mind that Hua-yen thinkers did not expound the doctrines of the school simply to engage in complicated mental games as philosophers are so often guilty of. Their intention in doing so was to encourage others to directly realise, for themselves, the nature of things. The primal importance that Hua-yen lays on direct vision lies in the fact that Hua-yen considers its philosophical worldview that of the Buddha himself, which he taught while in a state of *samadhi* or non-dual enlightenment.⁶² One cannot fully claim to understand Hua-yen without realising what Fa-tsang calls "oceanic reflection", which is the realisation of *tatbata*. Oceanic reflection is the state of a still mind freed from the waves of ignorance which are created and sustained by our unceasing attempts to grasp phenomena. But this freedom from the waves of ignorance does not mean that forms entirely disappear, and that one stares into a blank void, as some "neo-Buddhists" have claimed to have accomplished.⁶³ Rather, the true nature of the forms, which is emptiness, is made clear in the still and peaceful water of the ocean. Thus Fa-tsang writes:

When delusion ends, the mind is clear and myriad forms equally appear; it is like the ocean, where waves are created by the wind—when the wind stops, the water of the ocean grows clear, reflecting all images. The 'Treatise on the Awakening of Faith' calls it 'the repository of infinite qualities—the ocean of true thussness of the nature of things.' That is why it is called the oceanic reflection meditation.⁶⁴

Through attaining such a level of enlightenment, one witnesses directly what is theoretically expounded in Hua-yen doctrine, namely, the deepest wisdom taught by the Buddha. And so Fa-tsang writes, on

⁶² Cook, *Jewel*, 74.

⁶³ Corless, 23.

⁶⁴ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 152-53.

the realisation of this quintessential knowledge through observing but a single object:

The scripture says, 'The inexhaustible ocean of all teachings is converged on the enlightenment site of a single thing. The nature of things as such is explained by the Buddha' [...] Great knowledge, round and clear, looks at a fine hair and comprehends the ocean of nature, the source of reality is clearly manifest in one atom, yet illuminates the whole of being.⁶⁵

How exactly is such enlightenment attained? Although it is not the purpose of this article to probe into the kind of spiritual and religious life demanded by Hua-yen, it is important to at least note that one must cultivate meditation, since enlightenment is the fruit of meditative success. Meditative success, in turn, depends on appropriate ethical conduct. As Fa-tsang says, quoting Hua-yen scripture, "Morality is the basis of unexcelled enlightenment—you should fully uphold pure morality"; and elsewhere, "If conduct is not pure, concentration does not develop".⁶⁶ By the same token, while proper conduct aids in meditation, meditation also aids proper conduct, because, as Cooks observes, the "ethical life is the outflow of this meditation".⁶⁷ Fruitful meditation and appropriate ethical activity are, in the eyes of Hua-yen, mutually dependent.

Now one might at this point interject and ask: if all beings are already the Buddha, as the Hua-yen doctrine of the "womb of the Buddhahood" clearly states, why the need to seek enlightenment, the state of the Buddha, through meditation and proper conduct? Hua-yen does, it is true, concede that all beings are already enlightened. Fa-tsang asserts this very point when he writes, "[i]f you comprehend the inherent emptiness of sentient beings, there is really no one to liberate or be liberated".⁶⁸ But the truth is that enlightenment, while omnipresent, has not been realised by the vast majority of human beings. The proof of this widespread ignorance lies in the prevalence of human suffering. This is why, from the perspective of conventional truth, one must seek enlightenment.⁶⁹ Fa-tsang equates the enlightened Buddha within to a great jewel: "its essential nature is bright and clear, but having been

⁶⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 158-59.

⁶⁷ Cook, *Jewel*, 109.

⁶⁸ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 157.

⁶⁹ This is so because ultimate truth is reached *through* conventional truths in the same way that emptiness is postulated through an observation of phenomena.

covered by layers of dust, it has the stain of defilement". By the clarity of its essential nature, he means its emptiness, and by the stain of defilement, he means the ignorance which clouds one's direct perception of the transparency of the self and the world at large. "If people only think of the nature of the jewel," he continues, "and do not polish its various facets, they will never get it clean." That is to say, if they only philosophise about it, they will never directly see it, i.e. attain enlightenment. What is the polish that will wipe away the stain of ignorance and false attachments? Fa-tsang responds, the "various practices of morality, meditation, and knowledge".⁷⁰ What this means is that while all beings are already enlightened Buddhas, their ignorance prevents them from existentially apprehending this truth. This ignorance is the jewel's defilement, which, in actual fact, is an illusory defilement, a false mental projection. Thus the defilement, because it is non-existent, is clear, like the jewel itself, since both ignorance and enlightenment are empty. But because the unenlightened take the defilement to be real, distinct from the clarity of the jewel, they presume their ignorance to be actual, so they are ignorant of the true nature of their ignorance. If they were fully aware of the essence of their ignorance, which is empty, they would be enlightened. But if they were enlightened, they would not seek an escape from their supposed ignorance.

The Role of the Bodhisattva

The purpose of the Bodhisattvas is to guide the ignorant out of their supposed ignorance⁷¹ through teaching them about the true nature of their ignorance, its causes, and the means to eliminate it. The Bodhisattvas do this out of the great compassion that arises in them from witnessing the cycle of suffering that ignorant sentient beings are trapped in. The Bodhisattvas see that the ignorant are like children frightened by holograms of demons, so they act like adults who come and run their hands through the holograms, and point to the projector from which the images of the demons are formed. The fear of the children, like the suffering of the ignorant, comes from their misunderstanding of the nature of what they take to be real. The Bodhisattvas explain to the

⁷⁰ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 159.

⁷¹ Those who are ignorant but think they are enlightened are another case altogether. But they also receive the compassion and guidance of the Bodhisattva.

ignorant that the demons arise from the projector of their mind, and that the holograms “are empty and quiescent, of their own nature fundamentally nonexistent”.⁷² They teach the ignorant how to turn off the projector of the mind through right conduct and meditation, for once the “mind is not aroused, the environment is fundamentally empty”.⁷³ Once the ignorant fully realise the emptiness of things, their suffering, like the fear of the children, abates.

Guiding the ignorant out of their net of delusions is not an easy task. Even though many might theoretically acknowledge the emptiness of phenomena, they will continue to suffer as long as they do not existentially realise for themselves the suchness of things. Their existential ignorance is like that of a person who gets frightened by a horror movie, knowing, all the while, that the ghosts and monsters are fictitious. The enlightened person, however, is like the one who goes onto the set of the film, meets the actors, and observes the various tricks used to make the film appear real. Such a one, when he eventually watches the final production, will see something entirely different from the first the person who had no such exposure to the making of the film. The role of the Bodhisattva is like that of the free tour guide, who, having special access to the film-site, takes all those who are interested so they can see first-hand, by themselves, how such films are made. Without the Bodhisattva, it is almost impossible to enter the film-site. This is why their role in guiding humans to liberation from ignorance and suffering is indispensable. Hence Fa-tsang says:

For ordinary people and beginning students false and true are not yet distinguished; the net of delusion enters the mind and fools the practitioner. Without an adept teacher to ask, they have nothing to rely on [...] as days and months pass, over a long period of time, false views become so ingrained that even meeting with good conditions they become difficult to change.⁷⁴

Who exactly are the Bodhisattvas? In Hua-yen, and by extension, all of Mahayana, they are those beings who aspire towards the realisation of Buddhahood, but renounce entry into final *nirvana* and escape from the world of birth-and-death until all beings are saved. This means that even if they are on the verge of achieving final *nirvana*, they will retain certain intellectual and moral faults (*klesas*) so as to ensure their rebirth

⁷² Fa-tsang, *Return*, 161.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

into the world in order to help others.⁷⁵ One becomes a Bodhisattva by making a genuine vow to postpone one's own *nirvana* until all reach *nirvana*. From the standpoint of Hua-yen, such a vow reflects a truly profound understanding of the Buddha's teachings. One of the reasons for this is because the Bodhisattva, aware of the inter-dependence of all things, realises that everyone else's suffering is his own. When a fly gets caught in a spider's web, its frantic movements send vibrations across the entire web. The suffering of the ignorant is no different: it affects the totality of existence.

This picture gets more complicated when we realise that there will always be those in need of help. As Fa-tsang points out, Bodhisattvas forgo their own *nirvana* to "ransom all suffering beings from states of misery in order to cause them to attain happiness. *This they will do for ever and ever, with flagging* [emphasis mine]".⁷⁶ From this one might gather that the Bodhisattvas will never reach the final goal. But this is not completely true either. Recall that the doctrine of emptiness implies that all beings are ontologically without self. Buddhists advocate detachment because there is no one to attach, and nothing to be attached to. Covetously seeking *nirvana* betrays a genuine understanding of the nature of things because one is attempting to attain or realise one's own individual perfection. By foregoing *nirvana* and escape from *samsara*, the Bodhisattva in effect embodies the highest level of detachment possible, since he selflessly forgoes his own final and personal goal to help liberate others from ignorance and suffering.⁷⁷ But strangely, by this final sacrificial act, the Bodhisattva realises the only true enlightenment there is. By this grand feat of personal renunciation, he experientially attains the true meaning of selflessness, which is the goal of the Buddhist life. It was earlier pointed out that *nirvana* entails reaching the state where there is "nothing to be attained". The Bodhisattva attains final liberation from the yoke of self-centred clinging in the world by breaking all attachments, so that, indeed, for him, "there is nothing to be attained". This, in turn, enables him to attain *nirvana* in *samsara*. The idea is not so far-fetched once we recall the doctrine of interpenetration. As Nagarjuna says, "There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *samsara* from *nirvana*. There is nothing whatsoever differentiating *nirvana* from

⁷⁵ Cook, *Jewel*, 110.

⁷⁶ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 160.

⁷⁷ Cook, *Jewel*, 112.

samsara".⁷⁸ That is to say, since *li* and *shih*, the absolute and phenomena, interpenetrate, the Bodhisattva actually realises Buddhahood through the life of the Bodhisattva, which is a selfless life devoted to the liberation of all beings. He thus attains *nirvana* by renouncing *nirvana*. Or to put it another way, he attains *nirvana* in *samsara* by renouncing *nirvana* in *nirvana*, and so comes to embody, in the fullest sense, the reality of identity and interpenetration.

By engaging in the work of selflessly guiding others, the Bodhisattva realises the true nature of Buddhahood. That is to say, he embodies the egoless universal compassion which the Buddha himself embodied, and which led him to seek the liberation of others. In fact, according to the Saddharmapundarika Sutra, the Buddha himself has not completed the work of the Bodhisattva.⁷⁹ According to this text, the Buddha himself is a Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattvas are likewise Buddhas.

We can conclude by noting that in the coming together of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva, one witnesses the union of wisdom and compassion. This union signifies the merging of the knowledge that ensues from enlightenment (wisdom) and the work that enlightenment entails (centred on compassion). Wisdom is the fruit of tracing phenomena to emptiness, while compassion is the fruit of realising that emptiness reveals itself through interdependent origination. Thus wisdom and compassion, Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood, *nirvana* and *samsara*, emptiness and phenomena, all interpenetrate. Fa-tsang writes,

Seeing that form is empty produces great wisdom and not dwelling in birth-and-death; seeing that emptiness is form produces great compassion and not dwelling in *nirvana*. When form and emptiness are non-dual, compassion and wisdom are not different; only this is true seeing.⁸⁰

And true seeing, we might conclude, is the axis around which Hua-yen revolves. Only through such a mode of seeing does one fully grasp, both conceptually and existentially, the reality of emptiness, identity and interpenetration.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Quoted in Williams, 68.

⁷⁹ Cook, *Jewel*, 111.

⁸⁰ Fa-tsang, *Return*, 156.

⁸¹ I would like to thank Professors Leonard Priestley and Mohammed Rustom for their feedback on earlier drafts of this piece. This article is dedicated to the late Omer Fereig.