

Huayan

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Huayan



Three Worthies of Huayan - [Dazu Rock Carvings](#), [Chongqing](#), [China](#)

Chinese name

Chinese	华严宗
Traditional Chinese	華嚴宗

Transcriptions

Vietnamese name

Vietnamese	<i>Hoa-nghiêm tông</i>
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Korean name

Hangul	화엄종
Hanja	華嚴宗

Transcriptions

Japanese name

Kanji	華嚴宗
Kana	けごん しゅう

Transcriptions

Sanskrit name

Sanskrit	<i>Avatamsaka</i>
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[Chinese Buddhism](#)

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History [\[show\]](#)

Major figures [\[show\]](#)

Traditions [\[show\]](#)

Texts [\[show\]](#)

Architecture [\[show\]](#)

Bodhimāṇḍas [\[show\]](#)

Culture [\[show\]](#)

- [v](#)
- [t](#)
- [e](#)

The **Huayan** or **Flower Garland** school of [Buddhism](#) ([traditional Chinese](#): 華嚴; ; [pinyin](#): *Huáyán*, from [Sanskrit](#): *Avatamsaka*) is a tradition of [Mahayana Buddhist philosophy](#) that first flourished in [China](#) during the [Tang dynasty](#). The Huayan worldview is based primarily on the [Avatamsaka Sutra](#) ([Chinese](#): 華嚴經; [pinyin](#): *Huáyán jīng*).^[1] The name *Flower Garland* is meant to suggest the crowning glory of a Buddha's profound understanding of ultimate reality.

The Huayan School is known as [Hwaeom](#) in [Korea](#), [Kegon](#) in [Japan](#) and Hoa Nghiêm in [Vietnam](#). This tradition also had a strong influence on [Chan Buddhism](#).^[1]



Contents

- [1 Origins and development](#)
 - [1.1 Origins](#)
 - [1.2 Patriarchs](#)
 - [1.3 Stagnation](#)
- [2 Texts](#)
 - [2.1 *Avatamsaka Sūtra*](#)
 - [2.2 Other texts](#)
- [3 Theory and practice](#)
 - [3.1 Interpenetration](#)
 - [3.2 Li and Shi](#)
 - [3.3 Fourfold Dharmadhatu and meditation](#)
 - [3.4 Other practices](#)
 - [3.5 Sudden enlightenment](#)
 - [3.6 Paradox](#)
- [4 Classification of Buddhist teachings](#)
- [5 Influence](#)
- [6 References](#)
- [7 Sources](#)
- [8 Further reading](#)
- [9 External links](#)

Origins and development



Aerial view of Huayan temple, [Datong](#)

Origins

The earliest texts associated with the Avatamsaka sutra are the *Dousha jing* (Taisho 280), produced by [Lokaksema](#) in the latter part of the second century CE and the *Pusa benye jing* (T. 281), translated by Zhi Qian in the early to mid third century. There is evidence that these small Buddhavatamsaka sutras circulated on their own as individual scriptures.^[2]

The translation of the large Avatamsaka sutra is often dated to the [Southern Dynasties](#) (420–589) when a translation team led by Gandharan master, Buddhabhadra worked on the sutra. There is also evidence of this sutra tradition

in the [Northern Dynasties](#) (386–581) where a certain Xuangao (402–444) taught the *Huayan samadhi*.^[3]

Patriarchs

The founding of the school is traditionally attributed to a series of five “patriarchs” who were instrumental in developing the schools’ doctrines. These five are:^{[4][5]}

1. [Dushun](#) ([Chinese](#): 杜順; [Wade - Giles](#): *Tu-Shun*), responsible for the establishment of Huayan studies as a distinct field;
2. [Zhiyan](#) ([Chinese](#): 智儼; [Wade - Giles](#): *Chih-yen*), considered to have established the basic doctrines of the sect;
3. [Fazang](#) ([Chinese](#): 法藏; [Wade - Giles](#): *Fa-tsang*), considered to have rationalized the doctrine for greater acceptance by society;
4. [Chengguan](#) ([Chinese](#): 澄觀; [Wade - Giles](#): *Ch’eng-kuan*), together with Zongmi, are understood to have further developed and transformed the teachings
5. [Guifeng Zongmi](#) ([Chinese](#): 圭峰宗密; [Wade - Giles](#): *Kuei-feng Tsung-mi*), who is simultaneous a patriarch of the [Chinese Chán](#) tradition and who also incorporated Taoist and Confucian teachings.

The five monks later honored as Huayan patriarchs were erudite scholar-practitioners who connected Buddhism with Chinese traditional culture closely, creating a Buddhist historical trend in developing multiple facets while the tradition’s essence remained the same.^[6] Based on their writings, exegeses, and oral teachings, these men each played a significant and distinct role in the development of the school, although there are certain aspects of this patriarchal scheme which are clearly contrived. For example, Chengguan was born 26 years after Fazang’s death. According to Robert Gimello’s dissertation on Chih-Yen (1976), “most if not all of the major themes of Huayan thought” can be found in the works of the second patriarch Chih-yen, particularly the classification of scriptures and theories on the Dharmadhatu. Thus he names the patriarch Chih-yen (602–668) as the crucial figure in the foundation of Huayan.^[7] The tradition reached the height of its influence under Fazang, who was the Buddhist teacher of the [Empress Wu Zetian](#) (684 – 705).^[8]

Another important figure in the development and popularization of Huayan thought was the lay scholar [Li Tongxuan](#) ([Chinese](#): 李通玄, 635?–730), the author of the *Huáyán lùn* ([Chinese](#): 華嚴論), a popular and lengthy commentary on the Avatamsaka sutra. Fazang’s disciple Huiyuan (673–743) also wrote a commentary on the Avatamsaka.^[9]

Some accounts of the school also like to extend its patriarch-ship earlier to [Āsvaghoṣa](#) and [Nāgārjuna](#).

Stagnation

After the time of Zongmi and Li Tongxuan the Chinese school of Huayan generally stagnated in terms of new development, and then eventually began to decline. The school, which had been dependent upon the support it received from the government, suffered severely during the Buddhist purge of 841–845, initiated by [Emperor Wuzong of Tang](#), never to recover its former strength. Nonetheless, its profound metaphysics, such as that of the [Four Dharmadhātu](#) ([Chinese](#): 四法界) of interpenetration, had a deep impact on surviving East Asian schools.

Texts



Avatamsaka Sutra, vol. 12, frontispiece in gold and silver text on indigo blue paper, mid 14th century

Avataṃsaka Sūtra

The Huayan school's worldview was inspired on the content of what it considered to be the supreme Buddhist revelation, the [Avatamsaka Sūtra](#) (Flower Garland Sutra, [Ch.](#) *Huāyán Jīng*). The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* is a compilation of sutras of various length, which originally circulated as their own sutras before being combined.^[10] The earliest of these texts, the [Ten Stages Sutra](#), maybe dates from the first century CE.^[11] The [Daśabhūmika Sūtra](#) describes the ten stages on the [Bodhisattva](#)-path. The various sutras were probably joined together shortly before its translation into Chinese, at the beginning of the 5th century CE.^{[11][12]}

According to Williams, the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* is not a systematic philosophical work, but mentions various [Mahayana](#) teachings, including [Madhyamaka](#) [Śūnyatā](#) teachings,^[1] [Yogacara](#) ideas,^[1] as well as mentioning a pure untainted awareness or consciousness (*amalacitta*).^[13] It is filled with mystical and visionary imagery, focusing on the Buddha [Vairocana](#), who is said to pervade every atom of the entire universe with his magical creations and emanations as a way to help all beings:^[14]

In each dust-mote of these worlds

Are countless worlds and Buddhas...
From the tip of each hair of Buddha's body
Are revealed the indescribable Pure Lands...
The indescribable infinite Lands

All ensemble in a hair's tip [of Buddha].^[15]

An important doctrine that the Huayan school drew from this sutra is the idea that all levels of reality are interrelated and interpenetrated, the idea that "inside everything is everything else". The sutra states:

They . . . perceive that the fields full of assemblies, the beings and aeons which are as many as all the dust particles, are all present in every particle of dust. They perceive that the many fields and assemblies and the beings and the aeons are all reflected in each particle of dust.^[16]

In the Huayan school, this is depicted in the image of [Indra's net](#). This "unity in totality allows every individual entity of the phenomenal world its uniqueness without attributing an [inherent nature](#) to anything".^[15] According to Williams,

As a description of the way things are in our unenlightened world this seems incredible. But the dharmadhatu is the world as seen by the Buddha wherein there is no question of the world (an objectively real world 'out there') as distinct from meditative vision. Thus the sutra is less concerned with describing the world this way as with recounting the Bodhisattva's attainments by which he can see the world in such a light, and the Bodhisattva's miraculous powers by which, through his magical interventions in this world with no fixed hard boundaries, he can cause things to interpenetrate.^[16]

Other texts

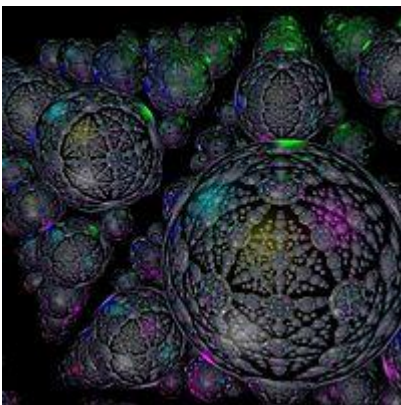
Other Mahayana texts such as the [Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana](#) (*Dasheng Qixin Lun* 大乘起信論), which was a condensation of Chinese thought on awakening and ultimate reality, influenced Huayan masters like Fazang and Zongmi, who both wrote commentaries on the text.^[17] The [Lotus sutra](#) was also seen as an important text in this school, though not as important as the Avatamsaka. The [Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment](#) was particularly important for [Zongmi](#).

The Huayan patriarchs wrote numerous commentaries and original treatises on the Mahayana sutras and Huayan philosophy. Fazang for example, wrote commentaries on the Avatamsaka, the [Lankavatara Sutra](#) and the Awakening of Faith.^[18] One of the key Huayan treatises is *On the Meditation of the Dharmadhātu* attributed to the first patriarch [Dushun](#).^[19] Another is [Fazang's](#) *Treatise on the Golden Lion* which is said to have been written to explain Huayan's view of interpenetration to [Empress Wu](#).^[20]

Peter N. Gregory notes that the Huayan commentarial tradition was:

"not primarily concerned with a careful exegesis of the original meaning of the scripture. Rather, what it discovered in the text was the justification for a number of ideas and metaphors in terms of which it elaborated its own body of doctrine. Many of the key Hua-yen doctrines that were inspired by the scripture (such as nature origination, the conditioned origination of the dharmadhatu, the samadhi of oceanic reflection, or the six aspects of all dharmas) played only a peripheral role in or had a tenuous connection with the actual Hua-yen sutra itself. The great commentaries written on the text by Fa-tsang and Ch'eng-kuan were not so much concerned with rendering a faithful and judicious interpretation of the words of the text as they were with using the text as a basis from which to advance a doctrinal agenda that was determined by the context of Sui-Tang Buddhism."^[21]

Theory and practice



A 3D rendering of Indra's net.

Huayan thought is mainly focused on explaining the nature of the [Dharmadhatu](#), the world as it is ultimately, from the point of view of a fully awakened being. It is often said to be the philosophical articulation of Chan meditation.^[22] It is influenced by the Avatamsaka and Buddha nature literature as well as by the Chinese Yogacara and Madhyamaka schools. Patriarchs of the school such as Zongmi were also influenced by Chinese philosophy, particularly the classics of [Taoism](#).^[23]

Interpenetration

A key doctrine of Huayan is the mutual containment and interpenetration of all phenomena (*dharmas*) or "perfect interfusion" (*yuanrong*, 圓融). This is associated with what the Huayan sees as its unique contribution, the "[dharmadhatu pratityasamutpada](#)". This is described by Wei Daoru as the idea that "countless dharmas (all phenomena in the world) are representations of the wisdom of Buddha without exception" and that "they exist in a state of mutual

dependence, interfusion and balance without any contradiction or conflict. This thought essentially argues that there is no relationship of cause and result among phenomena and that things are not formed sequentially. Instead, they constitute the world by the mutual interfusion of complete equality.”^[24]

According to this theory, any phenomenon exists only as part of the total nexus of reality, its existence depends on the total network of all other things, which are all equally connected to each other and contained in each other.^[25]

The Huayan patriarchs used various metaphors to express this, such as [Indra's net](#), a hall of mirrors and the world text. To illustrate the doctrine to [Empress Wu](#), the patriarch Fazang:

“called for a candle and placed it surrounded by mirrors on every side. When lit, the candle was reflected in each mirror, and each of the reflections in every other mirror so that in any one mirror were the images of all the others.”^[26]

This Buddhist doctrine also includes the views that:^[27]

- “Practicing one teaching is practicing all teachings”
- Ending one mental defilement is ending all of them
- Truth (or reality) is understood as encompassing and interpenetrating falsehood (or illusion), and vice versa
- Good is understood as encompassing and interpenetrating evil
- Similarly, all mind-made distinctions are understood as “collapsing” in the [enlightened understanding of emptiness](#) (a [tradition](#) traced back to the Buddhist philosopher [Nagarjuna](#))

Li and Shi

Another important distinction used by Huayan patriarchs is that of *li* and *shi*, noumenon and phenomenon which was explained using the metaphor of gold and lions, or water and waves. According to Paul Williams:

First, noumenon and phenomena mutually interpenetrate and are (in a sense) identical. There is no opposition between the two. The one does not cancel out the other. Second, Fazang explains elsewhere that since all things arise interdependently (following Madhyamika), and since the links of interdependence expand throughout the entire universe and at all time (past, present, and future depend upon each other, which is to say the total dharmadhatu arises simultaneously), so in the totality of interdependence, the dharmadhatu, all phenomena are mutually interpenetrating and identical.^[28]

Fourfold Dharmadhatu and meditation

The theory of the Fourfold Dharmadhatu (*sifajie*, 四法界) is explained in the "Meditative Perspectives on the Huayan Dharmadhatu" (*Huayan Fajie Guanmen*, 華嚴法界觀門) and its commentaries.^[23] This theory is the central meditative framework for the Huayan tradition. Another key text is the "Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of Huayan" (*Huayan wujiao zhiguan* 華嚴五教止觀).^[23] The Dharmadhatu is the goal of the bodhisattva's practice, the ultimate nature of reality which must be known or entered into (*ru*, 入). According to Fox, the Fourfold Dharmadhatu is "four cognitive approaches to the world, four ways of apprehending reality". The four ways of seeing reality are:^[23] ^[29]

1. All dharmas are seen as particular separate events or phenomena (*shi* 事). This is the mundane way of seeing.
2. All events are an expression of *li* (理, the absolute, principle or noumenon), which is associated with the concepts of [shunyata](#), "One Mind" (*yi xin* 一心) and [Buddha nature](#)
3. *Shi* and *li* interpenetrate (*lishi wuai* 理事無礙)
4. All events interpenetrate (*shishi wuai* 事事無礙), "all distinct phenomenal dharmas interfuse and penetrate in all ways" ([Zongmi](#)).

The three levels of Huayan meditation on the Dharmadhatu correspond to the last three views of the Dharmadhatu are:^[23]

1. Meditation on "True Emptiness."
2. Illuminating the non-obstruction of principle and phenomena.
3. Meditation on "universal pervasion and complete accommodation."

According to Fox, "these dharmadhatus are not separate worlds - they are actually increasingly more holographic perspectives on a single phenomenological manifold...they more properly represent four types or orders of perspectives on experience."^[23] Furthermore, for Huayan, this practice is the solution to the problem of samsara which lies in the "fixation or attachment to a particular perspective. What we think are the essences of objects are really therefore nothing but mere names, mere functional designations, and none of these contextual definitions need necessarily interfere with any of the others."^[23]

Other practices

According to Paul Williams, the reading and recitation of the Avatamsaka sutra was also a central practice for the tradition, for monks and laity.^[30]

Another practice which is highlighted in the Avatamsaka sutra is that of [Buddhānusr̥ti](#) or *nianfo*-mindfulness of the Buddha.^[31]

The tradition also mentions two key [samadhis](#), the ocean-seal samadhi (Ch. *haiyin sanmei*) and the huayan samadhi (*huayan sanmei*).^[32]

Layman Li Tongxuan developed a unique meditative practice based on the 9th chapter of the Avatamsaka sutra. The practice, named 'the contemplation of Buddhahood' (*foguang guan*), focused on tracing the universal light which is radiated by the Buddha in one's mind and expanding it further outwards.^[33]

Sudden enlightenment

Huayan favored the teaching of sudden enlightenment. This is because the Buddha nature is already present in all sentient beings and also because their theory of interpenetration entails that Buddhahood is already present at the first stage of a Bodhisattva's path.^[34] According to Li Tongxuan:

[T]he first access of faith in the mind of the practitioner is in itself the culmination of the entire path, the very realization of final Buddhahood....

'Faith' or confidence in the possibility of enlightenment is nothing but enlightenment itself, in an *anticipatory and causative modality*.^[35]

Buddhahood was seen as beyond language and stages of practice. Because practices cannot create something that is already not imminent, they were seen as simply revealing what was already there. The patriarch Zongmi formulated his own theory of awakening which was "immediate awakening followed by gradual cultivation" and the view that "immediate and gradual are not only not contradictory, but are actually complementary".^[23]

Paradox

Huayan makes extensive use of [paradox](#) in argument and literary imagery. All three types of paradox originate in the tension between [conventional and absolute truth](#). Huayan uses three types of paradox:

1. Emphasizing the concept of śūnyatā, first is asserted that a phenomenon X is empty, which implies that X is not X. An example from Fazang is the assertion:

[W]hen one understands that origination is without self-nature, then there is no origination.^[36]

2. Reversing the first paradox by asserting that any empty phenomenon is an expression of the absolute non-duality between emptiness and form, or the identity between conditioned, relative reality and the ultimate truth of [tathatā](#). This paradox is derived from two doctrinal sources:

- The Hua-yen concept of "true emptiness."
- The Hua-yen interpretation of the dialectic of the One Mind in the [Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana](#).

Fazang's paradoxical assertion illustrates this second type:

When the great wisdom of perfect clarity gazes upon a minute hair, the universal sea of nature, the true source, is clearly manifest.^[36]

3. The third variation of paradox is grounded in the Hua-yen doctrine of the "nonobstruction of all phenomena" (shih shih wu-ai(k)). Each phenomenon is perceived as interpenetrating with and containing all others. This paradoxical violation of the conventional order of time and space is exemplified by Fa-tsang's famous "Essay on the Golden Lion":

In each and every hair [of the lion] there is the golden lion. All of the lions contained in each and every hair simultaneously and suddenly penetrate into one hair. [Therefore], within each and every hair there are unlimited lions.^[36]

Classification of Buddhist teachings

Buddhism was introduced into China in bits and pieces. When the knowledge of Buddhism grew larger, various schools attempted to get a grip on the Buddhist tradition by developing classifications of teachings,^[17] such as the [Five Periods and Eight Teachings](#) of the [Tiantai-school](#).

The Hua-yen school developed a fivefold classification:^[37]

1. The [Hinayana-teachings](#), especially the [Sarvastivadins](#)
2. The [Mahayana-teachings](#), including [Yogacara](#), [Madhyamaka](#)
3. The "Final Teachings", based on the [Tathagatagarbha-teachings](#), especially the [Awakening of Faith](#)
4. The [Sudden Teaching](#), "which 'revealed' (*hsien*) rather than verbalised the teaching"^[37]
5. The Complete, or Perfect, Teachings of the Avatamsaka-sutra and the Hua-yen school.

Huayan and [Chán](#) had doctrinal arguments regarding which would be the correct concept of sudden awakening. The teachings of the Chán-school were regarded as inferior by the Hua-yen teachers. The Chán-school polemitized against this classification, by devising its own rhetorics in defense.^[38]

Influence

The doctrines of the Huayan school ended up having profound impact on the philosophical attitudes of [East Asian Buddhism](#). According to Wei Daoru their theory of perfect interfusion was "gradually accepted by all Buddhist traditions and it eventually permeated all aspects of Chinese Buddhism."^[39]

[Chinese Chán](#) was profoundly influenced by it, though Chán also defined itself by distinguishing itself from Huayan.^[38] [Tsong-mi](#), the Fifth Patriarch of the Hua-yen school, also occupies a prominent position in the history of Chán. During the Song, the Hua-yen metaphysics were completely assimilated by the Chán-school.^[40]

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External links

- [Buddhism in a nutshell - Hua-yen](#)
- [Chang Chung-Yuan, *The World of Shih & Li of Tung-Shan*](#)
- [Flower Adornment Sutra - Hua Yan Jing - Avatamsaka Original Text](#)
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- [v](#)
- [t](#)
- [e](#)

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