

The Huayen School

The Huayen (Korean Hwao'm, Japanese Kegon) School is based on the Avatamsaka or "Flower Ornament Sutra", and counts as one of the four major schools of Chinese Buddhism. Its teachings emphasize the integration of Buddhist practice with all aspects of life, and yet, master Haiyun believes that they are particularly suitable for the modern age.

The school took shape during the Tang Dynasty (618-906), and although the monk Tu Shun or Fa Shun (557-640) is regarded as its First Patriarch, the real founders were Chih Yen (602-668) and his chief disciple Fa Tsang (643-712). Another important figure at the time was the hermit-scholar Li Tung Hsuan (635-730, or 646-740). After the Fourth Patriarch, Cheng Kuan (738-839), who wrote a massive commentary and sub commentary on the Sutra, and the Fifth Patriarch, Tsung Mi (780-814), who was also a lineage-holder in the Chan tradition, the Huayen School entered a period of decline, although its influence remained pervasive in East Asian Buddhism generally, and in the Chan (Korean S'on, Japanese Zen) School in particular.

Like other schools of Mahayana Buddhism, the Huayen School emphasizes the importance of understanding Emptiness (*sunyata*) and perceiving the true nature of the mind, of awakening the Aspiration of Enlightenment (*Bodhicitta*) and practicing the various stages of the *Bodhisattva* Path. But it also has its own distinctive approach to these teachings, based on the vision of Enlightenment and of the true nature of things revealed in the Avatamsaka Sutra.

A well-known metaphor used in the Sutra itself, and frequently elaborated on by the teachers of the Huayen School, is that of a great network of jewels said to be magically suspended above the palace of the god Indra. Each of these jewels is like a mirror, reflecting all the others, and each reflection reflects all the other reflections, and so on *ad infinitum*. This metaphor is meant to illustrate how all phenomena are empty or illusory but interconnected and inter-implicated. It is also meant to suggest that reality is inexhaustible precisely because it is empty, and that there is no duality between the illusory appearance of things and their true nature as Emptiness or Suchness.

Another way of summarizing the Huayen teachings is to be found in the scheme of Four Realms of Reality (*dharmadhatu*) first formulated by Cheng Kuan:

1) The Realm of Phenomena. This is the world of things and events as normally perceived. In Fa Tsang's Essay on the Golden Lion, in which he uses the golden statue of a lion to illustrate various aspects of the teachings, this Realm is represented by the perceived image of the lion. Fa Tsang says: "The lion has the quality of being empty; there is nothing there but gold.... Yet the lion seems to our senses to exist."

2) The Realm of Ultimate Reality. This refers to the single ultimate reality underlying the apparent diversity of phenomena. In traditional Mahayana Buddhist terms it corresponds to Emptiness, *Dharmakaya*, *Tathata*, etc. In Fa Tsang's metaphor it corresponds to the gold itself. Apart from the gold, there is no such quality as "lion to be found... If one considers the lion correctly at the time when it comes into existence, it will be seen that it is only gold which comes

into existence, and that apart from the gold not a single thing exists.”

3) The Realm of the Nonobstruction of Reality and Phenomena. This refers to the nonduality of illusion and reality, Samsara and Nirvana, form and emptiness, it means that reality is not something separate from illusion, Enlightenment is not something separate from ignorance; they are merely two aspects of the same things (which is not a thing at all). So, Fa Tsang says: “Emptiness of the gold has no qualities in itself, and so is made manifest by form of the lion; this does not obstruct illusory existence of the golden lion. . . Although from start to finish there is nothing but emptiness, this does not obstruct the vivid manifestation of illusory existence.”

4) The Realm of the Nonobstruction of Phenomenon and Phenomenon. This represents the vision of all things as contained in every individual thing that is expressed by the parable of Indra’s Net. So, for example, Fa Tsang says of the golden lion: “Every single hair contains the entire lion; the eyes are the ears, the ears are the nose, the nose is the tongue, and the tongue is the body; all exists freely without impeding or obstructing one another at all... the lion’s eyes, ears, limbs, joints and every single hair contain the golden lion in it is entirely in each hair of the lion simultaneously and all at once enters into a single hair, and each and every hair contains an unlimited number of lions.”

The Avatamsaka Sutra

The *Huayen Ching* or Avatamsaka Sutra is the largest sutra in the Chinese Canon and presents itself as being given immediately after the Buddha’s Enlightenment. It was first translated into Chinese by Buddhahadra in 418-422, and a second, slightly longer, translation was done by Siksana in 695-699.

The Sutra teaches a vision of reality, or enlightenment, in which there is no obstruction between phenomena, so that all things interpenetrate, and the whole of time and space is contained within even the tiniest object. Hence the Sutra abounds in such statement as “All the worlds and the three periods of time— past, present, and future—appear within a single atom,” “the tip of a single hair can contain all the worlds.” “In every atom the buddhas reveal the glories of as many buddha realms as there are atoms in all the worlds”, and so on.

But the Sutra’s main concern is with the practice of the Bodhisattva Path, which the Huayen School divides into 52 stages, and with the initial Aspiration to Enlightenment, the first firm and unshakeable commitment to follow the Path on Buddhahood (bodhicittotpada). However, since past, present and future, beginning and end all contain one another, the Sutra also claims that the ultimate conclusion of the Path (i.e. Buddhahood) is already present as soon as it is truly begun. So it declares that “Perfect Enlightenment is accomplished the moment one truly aspires to it.”

More than just a text, the Avatamsaka Sutra, as a direct expression of the Buddha’s enlightenment, is itself a concrete embodiment of the Teachings, as well as a guide to practice. So Ven. Haiyun points out that “the Avatamsaka Sutra is not an ordinary text to be explained and commented on, but a teaching for practice and realization. “He adds that “Huayen has a very rich tradition of practice, and the Sutra itself will take you into that realm.”

In the Sutra two bodhisattvas in particular are of great importance, Manjusri and Samantabhadra, who symbolize wisdom and the commitment to practice respectively. According to Ven. Haiyun, “Manjusri represents faith, understanding and wisdom, while Samantabhadra stands for ultimate reality, essential truth and enlightened conduct.” For the Huayen practitioner, therefore, Manjusri is the initial inspiration and guidance on the Path, while Samantabhadra is the practice itself. So Ven. Haiyun says, “Whatever practice you follow, it is based on the vows and practice of Samantabhadra, it will encompass all other practices.”

~ “Huayen World” Teachings and meditation methods in Mahayana Buddhism
By Venerable Master Haiyun Jimeng