East Asian Buddhism

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Historical Context

It is unclear exactly when and how Buddhism first entered China. Traditionally it was believed to have arrived with the translators Kāśyapamātanga and Dharmarakṣa, who came to Luoyang from Central Asia in 266 CE. However, early records indicate Buddhists were already in the country between the first century BCE and the first century CE. By the late Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) Chinese intellectuals had developed sophisticated literary and philosophical traditions. They legitimized and maintained their aristocratic positions by instituting Confucian-based theoretical and bureaucratic systems of governing. Over time, however, greed and nepotism contributed to the corruption of the Han bureaucracy, which became a factor in widespread peasant revolts. This internal chaos was fertile ground for cultivating alternative views on social and metaphysical reality. The most successful of these were associated with the development of East Asian Buddhist philosophy.

Various historical events around this time had long-term consequences for this development. In the late Han period, a group of Chinese intellectual dissidents left the capital for the provinces. They were attracted to philosophical Daoism (which rejected the social philosophy of Confucianism), observed meditative practices to attain release from attachment to mundane circumstances, and hoped to realize their place in the natural world. Subsequently, in the late Six Dynasties period (222–589), a time of disunity in China, others who were influenced by this group established a movement to discuss metaphysics and other philosophical issues in ways we might compare with later Zen kōans. Developing a type of philosophical discourse called “pure conversation” (清談 qingtān), participants criticized the socio-political establishment from the standpoint of insightful wisdom (prajñā) and practiced Buddhist meditation (dhyāna). By the fourth and fifth centuries, Buddhist priests were actively involved. This Daoist–Buddhist syncretism movement helped popularize Buddhism, which in turn enabled monks to...
exercise social influence. Such influence eventually contributed to the four major Buddhist persecutions in China and further shaped the development of Buddhist philosophy in East Asia.

Another important factor in this development is that linguistic and cultural differences made it difficult to compose accurate translations from Sanskrit. Buddhist philosophical terms such as śūnyatā (“emptiness”) were unfamiliar to the Chinese. To deal with this, early translators used a style known as “matching meanings” (格義 geyi) that assigned what they considered rough Daoist equivalents to troublesome Buddhist concepts. Emptiness was translated as “original nothingness” (本無 benwu), a term used by neo-Daoists such as Wang Bi (226–249 CE) to describe cosmology and cosmogony. Other terms, including “nirvāṇa” and “buddha,” were transliterated much as they are in English. It took nearly 500 years for Chinese Buddhists to abandon geyi, and its remnants remain at the heart of much of East Asian Buddhist thinking. Later translators, among them Daoan (312–385) and Kumārajīva (344–413), used different strategies that sent East Asian Buddhism in yet another direction. Kumārajīva’s translations were in a polished literary style that increased their popularity. But his translations were not always precise. For example, he did not distinguish between a stupa (mounds where Śākyamuni’s and other sages’ ashes were allegedly buried) and a chaitya (a site for worship).

The Sui dynasty (589–618) reunified China and honored Buddhism. But because of the persecutions of the previous period, Sui Buddhists wanted to create an original Chinese Buddhism that was equal, if not superior, to that of India. Three features distinguished the native schools that developed during the Sui and early Tang (618–907) periods.

1 There was a shift from the identification of Indian and Central Asian founders to native Chinese founders. This was facilitated by the establishment of a Confucian-based patriarchal system consisting of Chinese monks.

2 Doctrinal classification systems (panjaio) were developed to evaluate the relative merits of various Buddhist philosophical teachings. These were designed to prove the superiority of Chinese Buddhist traditions compared to one another and to Indian Buddhism.

3 What has been called a positive worldview developed in contrast with the Indian notion of duḥkha, suffering or perpetual dissatisfaction. This was in line with centuries of Chinese predilection for viewing our natural state in positive terms, as seen in diverse writings by Daoists and Mencius.

In the seventh century a new translation tradition emerged with the potential of supplanting the Chinese developments with the philosophy of Indian Buddhism. This was epitomized by the style of Xuanzang (600–664), who had traveled to India to break away from Chinese interpretations and learn native Buddhist philosophy. Even though Xuanzang’s translations may have been closer to the originals in many respects, a large number of Chinese Buddhists preferred the meanings they had grown up with, in the old-style translations of Kumārajīva and others. Very soon after his time, philosophical and political conflict arose over Xuanzang’s interpretations and eventually the old Chinese understandings prevailed and developed further.
Table 7.1 outlines the Chinese patriarchal system. It indicates the shift from Indian and Central Asian to Chinese founders, which is not only an ethnic change but a doctrinal one. The philosophies of these East Asian Mahāyāna schools and the Zhenyan tradition are described below.

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Faxiang (法相: Jp. Hossō; K. Beopsang)

Faxiang is the Chinese version of Yogācāra, systematized in India by the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. The two had many gifted students, including Dignāga (c. 480–540), famous for developing Indian formal logic. Dignāga was followed by Dharmapāla (530–561) and his disciple Śīlabhadra (529–645). The Chinese monk Xuanzang risked his life by violating an imperial ban on traveling abroad so he could study Yogācāra in India. Arriving in 629, he studied under Śīlabhadra and other masters. He returned to China in 645 with many Sanskrit manuscripts, most related to Abhidharma and Yogācāra.

Xuanzang became engrossed in his assignment by the emperor to head a massive scripture translation project at the newly built Cien temple. Meanwhile, one of his top students, Kuiji (632–682), set about systematizing what would be the controversial first Chinese developments of Faxiang. One of his detractors was another student of Xuanzang, the influential Korean monk Woncheuk (613–696). Woncheuk left Cien temple and wrote his commentaries on the Yogācāra texts, which eventually became standard in China and throughout East Asia. In contrast, the Japanese monk Dōshō (629–700) studied closely under Xuanzang and Kuiji. In 660 he introduced Kuiji’s version of Faxiang to Japan under the name Hossō. However, Hossō’s doctrinal foundation was soon changed to Woncheuk’s version by other Japanese monks who subsequently returned from China and by Korean monks living in Japan.

The words Faxiang, Hossō and Beopsang literally mean “dharma marks” or “dharma characteristics” (Skt dharma lakṣaṇa). In this case, as in the Abhidharmakośa, dharma means the elements of existence. That is, dharma is what we might cautiously call phenomenal reality. However, how the elements of existence are cognized is described differently in the Abhidharmakośa and the later Faxiang tradition. The Abhidharmakośa identifies the mind (citta) as the source which produces sensations. Its detailed analysis of the process of cognition is in terms of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch-
consciousnesses, what we can logically and empirically verify about reality. Again noting the anachronism and cultural differences, we could conditionally see this approach as “psychological” in that it attempts to understand the mind by analyzing its functions. In contrast and with the same qualifiers, we can call Yogācāra’s approach to mind “phenomenological.” While Yogācāra is as logical and empirically oriented as the Abhidharmakośa, its methodology and assumptions are different, based in part on meditative insights. In a sense, then, the Abhidharmakośa maps the mind in terms of elements of existence, from the outside in; Yogācāra does the same from the inside out.

Yogācāra analysis proceeds by identifying and observing eight components of mind or “consciousnesses” (Skt vijñāna) and their interactions. One point of contention among adherents to Yogācāra theory that gave rise to East Asian strains is the interpretation of the cognitive function of the eighth of these, the ālayavijñāna or storehouse consciousness.

The ālayavijñāna is considered the repository of our past actions or karma. In short, it is the part of the mind that takes sights, sounds, etc., and interprets them according to present circumstances. Perception is conditioned by memories of past experiences deposited in the ālaya. For Faxiang, cognition involves four elements: (1) the perceived, (2) the perceiver, (3) awareness of the perceiver perceiving, and (4) awareness of that awareness. Other Yogācāra commentators disagree. Of these four elements of cognition, Śhiromati (c. 420–550) acknowledged only the first, Nanda (c. sixth century) the first two, Dignāga the first three, and, finally, Dharmapāla all four. Faxiang follows Dharmapāla’s interpretation.

Faxiang traditionally relies on six sūtras and eleven sāstras for theoretical grounding. Foremost is the Treatise on Consciousness-Only (Ch. Cheng Weishi Lun) sometimes called by its Sanskrit equivalent name Viśṇaptimātratāsiddhi-sāstra.3 The text was composed by Xuanzang, translating Vasubandhu’s Thirty Verses on Consciousness-Only (Skt Trīṃśikā-viśṇaptimātratā) and incorporating three of ten commentaries on it that Xuanzang discovered in India, including that of Dharmapāla. The Treatise on Consciousness-Only gives the details of the four elements of cognition based on Dharmapāla’s tradition and different from the Yogācāra traditions developed by other Indians. Like other Yogācāra traditions, however, Faxiang finds that the world as we ordinarily know it is a mental fabrication.

Another important factor in Faxiang’s eventual philosophical divergence from Indian traditions is Yogācāra’s adherence to gotra theory. Accordingly, sentient beings are predestined by karma to be born into one of five lineages. These are śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, indeterminate beings, and icchantikas with no aptitude for awakening. These five gotras are first described in the Sūtra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets (Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra),1 a prominent Yogācāra text. Like Indian Yogācāra, the early Faxiang tradition of Xuanzang and Kuīji adhered to this understanding. Gotra explains five basic dispositions, addressing, for example, why some people have no interest in Buddhism or any ability to understand it. However, there was a large problem in this for some Buddhists. Gotra theory appears contrary to the deeply held Chinese belief that all sentient beings have buddha-nature, meaning they are innately enlightened. This is the key ingredient to the positive worldview of East Asian Buddhism. Buddha-nature is accepted by the large and influential Ekāyāna traditions, including Tiantai and Huayan. For this reason, some of the panjiao schemes of Chinese
Buddhist traditions classified Faxiang as only quasi-Mahāyāna. Likewise, Woncheuk rejected gotra theory in his version of Faxiang that was adopted as orthodoxy in China, Korea, and Japan soon after Xuanzang’s time, and to the dismay of Kuiji. Another departure came when Chinese Buddhists decided to rewrite the section on bodhisattva ethics found in the Indian *Discourse on the Stages of Yogic Practice (Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra)* dated to the fourth century. Referring to gotra, the original text says those who are bodhisattvas must acknowledge this and act accordingly. Among the acts described as appropriate for those of the bodhisattva gotra are those opposing an unjust ruler and offering material support to the politically oppressed. This may have been the policy of early East Asian Yogācāra, influencing the social projects of Dōshō and his alleged disciple Gyōki (668–749), who was called a bodhisattva in Japan. However, the Chinese apocryphal text *Fawang-jing*, while almost certainly based on the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*, omits references to gotra and opposition to unjust civil authority. Given the Chinese partiality for Confucian morality and buddha-nature, as well as the direction of support from the court, it is perhaps unsurprising that the bodhisattva vows of the *Fawang-jing* soon eclipsed those of the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*. The latter became obsolete throughout East Asia.

Sanlun (三論; Jp. Sanron; K. Samnon)

The name Sanlun means “three treatises.” The three treatises that serve as main texts for the tradition are the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (Skt Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā; Ch. Zhong lun), the *Twelve Gate Treatise* (Skt Dvādasadvīra-śāstra; Ch. Shier men lun), and the *One Hundred Verses Treatise* (Skt Śata-śāstra, Ch. Bai lun). The first two were written by Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE) and the third by his disciple Aryadeva (c. 170–270). Sometimes another text is added, the *Treatise on the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Skt Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra; Ch. Da zhi du lun), attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva. Then the tradition is called Silun, “four treatises.” Because three of these four texts were translated by Kumārajīva, he is considered the founder of what is called old Sanlun. Later, the monk Jizang (549–623) systematized the ideas and contributed to the methodology of the tradition. He thereby came to be known as the founder of new Sanlun. The philosophy of old and new Sunlun is grounded in Indian Mādhyamaka philosophy. However, there are distinct differences between these traditions.

In the sixth century, Indian Madhyamaka split into two schools: Prāsaṅgika, founded by Buddha-pālita (c. 470–540), and Svātantrika, founded by Bhāviveka (c. 500–570). Prāsaṅgika attacked the claims of all schools of thought, revealing their internal contradictions and false premises. Like Nāgārjuna, it held that the truth of non-substantiality (Skt śūnyatā) can be revealed by refuting all assumptions about the nature of reality. Svātantrika criticized this method and argued for using Buddhist logic rather than criticism to reveal truth. Whereas Prāsaṅgika made no assertions about the nature of reality, Svātantrika did. Sanlun takes a different approach. Although it also seeks to reveal truth by criticizing claims about reality, it makes more use of other ideas in its three treatises. It employs the two-truth theory expounded in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. That is, there are provisional or conventional truths...
about reality that are valuable for dealing with day-to-day life. However, there is also an ultimate truth we can realize through meditative training, and this truth does not accord with what we ordinarily assume about the world. Similarly, from the Twelve Gate Treatise, Sanlun adopts the idea that wisdom has two levels, ordinary knowledge and extraordinary wisdom (prajñā). From the One Hundred Verses Treatise, Sanlun uses a cognitive argument about the realm of the knower and that of the known. Essentially, although we conventionally believe there is a distinction between these as subject and object, our assumptions are incorrect. The truth of the emptiness of such categories is revealed to us through prajñā.

Like Madhyamaka generally, Sanlun believes suffering is caused by attachment to objects, theories and ideas. It constructed a classification system of four categories: (1) non-Buddhists who believe in a self that is the agent that interprets the world; (2) adherents of the Abhidharma teachings who reject the reality of self but believe the elements of existence are substantial and permanent; (3) Satyasiddhi followers who reject the ontological existence of elements; and (4) the Śūnyāvādins, who cling to the notion of emptiness as an absolute, including some followers of Madhyamaka itself. Sanlun argued that non-attachment can be achieved through a reorientation of consciousness so that there is achievement of wuxin (無心 Jp. mushin), no-mind. Wuxin is a state of consciousness free of the ordinary identification of self and mind, in which there is actualization of all sentient beings as interrelated and possessing buddha-nature. In these ways, new Sanlun diverges from both the attack-method of the Prāsaṅgikas and the logic of Svātantra. Instead, it develops what can be seen as a devotional theme in the unconditional acceptance of and reverence for buddha-nature. This is the basis for its system of practical ethics.

Old Sanlun was essentially a projection of Indian Madhyamaka. Because new Sanlun emphasizes conventional reality, the idea of dependent co-arising (Skt pratityasamutpāda) becomes more important than that of emptiness. Old Sanlun does not speak of buddha-nature but new Sanlun makes it a focus. The latter identifies buddha-nature with the dharmadhātu, the undifferentiated realm of reality experienced when there is no attachment. Thus, Jizang argued, both sentient beings and inanimate objects have buddha-nature. Through these ideas, new Sanlun helped shaped native traditions of Chinese Buddhism in the Sui-Tang period, especially Tiantai.

Tiantai (天台; Jp. Tendai; K. Cheontae)

This prominent East Asian Buddhist tradition takes its name from Mount Tiantai, where the renowned master Zhiyi (538–597) meditated and trained disciples. Zhiyi retreated to the solitude of the mountain after abandoning a prestigious post at the national academy in Nanjing when he realized the depth of student apathy there. Although he is considered the third patriarch of Tiantai, he is thought to have systematized its philosophy and practices. Zhiyi’s ideas are preserved mainly in works compiled by his disciples from their lecture notes. Of these, the most important are the Great Calming and Contemplating (Ch. Mohe zhiguan), The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra (Ch. Miao fa lian hua jing xuan yi), and Language and Phrases of the Lotus Sūtra (Ch. Miao fa lian hua jing wen ju).
Tiantai doctrine is based primarily on the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, and the *Treatise on the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Ch. Da zhi du lun). These texts describe buddha-nature and explain the grounds for it. For Tiantai, buddha-nature refers to insight into emptiness. Unlike Indian Buddhist logicians, Tiantai masters do not attempt to understand emptiness through dialectical reasoning. Instead, like the Sanlun masters, they emphasize the ethical aspect of emptiness. Accordingly, insight into emptiness is insight into dependent co-arising which brings about the awareness that all sentient beings are interrelated and interdependent. Compassion springs from this realization. In the context of Tiantai, buddha-nature is compassion and it is *tathatā*.

Zhiyi describes ten aspects of *tathatā*: (1) its form, (2) the properties of its form, (3) the underlying essence of its form, (4) its potential function, (5) the manifestation of that function, (6) its cause, (7) its condition, (8) its result, (9) its retribution, and (10) the sum of the above. The ten aspects are meant not to define *tathatā* but to describe features related to it. Tiantai names the *Lotus Sūtra* as the canonical source for the ten aspects. However, its detractors have pointed out that the ten aspects appear only in Kumārajīva’s translation and cannot be found in the Sanskrit version, Dharmarakṣa’s Chinese translation, or the Tibetan translation. Just as Sanlun equated buddha-nature with *dharmadhātu*, Tiantai sees *tathatā* as *dharmadhātu*. For Tiantai, awareness of *tathatā* is Buddhist awakening. While meditation is required to gain insight into *tathatā*, Tiantai maintains that doctrinal study is of equal importance. Even though meditation may focus on subjective realization and doctrinal study on objective truth, these and all seeming dualities coexist and are inseparable. This is described in Tiantai’s concepts of “3,000 realms in an instant of thought” (一念三千 Ch. yi nian an qian; Jp. ichinen sanzen) and “the threefold contemplation in a single mind” (一心三觀 Ch. yixin san guan; Jp. isshin sangan). The former is Tiantai’s central doctrine; the latter is the method for experiencing it.

The “3,000 realms in an instant of thought” doctrine begins with the idea of “ten realms” described in numerous Buddhist texts and illustrated in “wheel of life” paintings. These are the realms of (1) hell, (2) hungry spirits, (3) animals, (4) asuras, (5) human beings, (6) heavenly beings, (7) voice-hearers, (8) cause-awakened ones, (9) bodhisattvas, and (10) buddhas. At first these may have been thought of as physical realms where one is reborn according to karmic retribution. Later, however, and according to the *Lotus Sūtra*, these realms can be seen as psychological states, all present in each person in different proportions at different times. For Tiantai, in any one realm, the other nine are present in some capacity. The number 3,000 was arrived at by first considering that each of the ten realms is involved with each of the other realms, so that 100 realms exist. The ten aspects of *tathatā* are involved in each of these 100 realms, so that 1,000 realms exist. We are said to experience each of these 1,000 realms in three aspects, called three realms of existence. We experience them according to (1) the five aggregates that the Buddha said compose a human being (form, feeling, perception, impulse, and consciousness), (2) temporal conditions, and (3) our environment. Taking this into account, there are said to be a total of 3,000 realms in an instant of thought. Although this may be overly complex and unnecessarily divisive, it is meant to imply the unity and co-dependent nature of the universe.
Tiantai devised “the threefold contemplation in a single mind” as a means of experiencing this universal oneness, which is *dharmadhātu* and *tathatā*. This is a meditative practice aimed at examining one’s own mind through the “threefold truth” mentioned by Nāgārjuna in the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. Accordingly, all things are empty (Skt *śunya*): all things are temporary (continually dependently co-arising and going out of existence); all things compose the Middle Path between these. The Middle Path may appear to imply the rejection of the first two as extremes, but Tiantai’s understanding is that truth has three aspects that are really one. In *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra*, Zhiyi describes this as the “round threefold truth,” as opposed to a conceptualization of these as three opposing entities or a linear continuum. Accordingly, the ultimate truth of emptiness, which is the *dharmadhātu*, is not opposed to provisional truth experienced as *tathatā*. Indeed, *samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*. Zhiyi also calls this practice the “Round and Abrupt Contemplation.” Depending on their aptitudes and level of understandings, practitioners may abruptly begin focusing on any point in the round truth: emptiness, dependent co-arising, or the Middle Path. They would then follow corresponding graduated steps for calming (*samatha*) and contemplating (*vipaśyanā*) described by Zhiyi. Since this process is seen as a circle, the beginner’s practice is considered no less profound than that of advanced students.

Although Tiantai affirms phenomenal reality, this is not the same as the affirmation by the *Abhidharmakośa*. The *Abhidharmakośa* interprets reality in terms of the elements of existence, which are permanent and unchanging. Tiantai interprets it as emptiness, dependent co-arising, and the Middle Path all in one. As seen above, Zhiyi’s conception of calming and contemplating is also different from that of Indian Buddhism. Indian *samatha-vipaśyanā* practitioners observed calming and contemplation in sequential order, assuming calming produces contemplation. Tiantai sees them as inseparable and as a circle. While calming produces contemplation, contemplation brings calm.

**Huayan (華嚴; Jp. Kegon; K. Hwaem)**

The name “Huayan” means “flower garland.” It is the Chinese name of the tradition’s most important text, the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (Skt *Avatamsaka-sūtra*). The flower garland is symbolic of the *dharmadhātu*. Huayan conceptualized this as a multiverse composed of an infinite variety of universes, all of which reflect one another. Like Tiantai, Huayan is a native Chinese tradition that became culturally influential and politically powerful during the Tang dynasty. Likely because of this affluence, it was transmitted to Korea and Japan, where it was embraced and financially promoted by rulers and clergy alike. In Korea, as Hwaem, it is still the most prominent Buddhist doctrinal system alongside Seon (Zen), which is the most popular tradition for Buddhist practice. In Japan during the Nara period (710–794), as Kegon, it was the most dominant among the Buddhist traditions and was the principal school of thought behind the imperial construction of the large statue of Vairocana Buddha in the capital.

The *Flower Garland Sūtra* appears to be made up of a number of books that were likely independent scriptures in India. It is unknown when and where they were assembled as one unit. In China there were various translations of it made between the fifth
and eighth century, each of different length and content. Because of its strangeness in
tone and themes, Tiantai and other panjiao systems classified it as a text expressing the
Buddha’s ideas within the first seven days of his awakening. Accordingly, at that time
the Buddha entered sea-state samādhi (海印三味 Ch. hai yin san mei; Jp. kaiin sanmai;
Skt sāgara-mudrā samādhi), a condition wherein one experiences reality directly, without
interpretation and evaluation. His thoughts and perceptions are said to have been
extraordinarily peculiar and therefore incomprehensible through ordinary patterns
of thought. The implication is that the multidimensional and ever evolving nature of
reality defies the boundaries of static theories and can best be spoken of through crea-
tive ambiguity and uncertainty in language. Proceeding in this way, the central char-
acter in the scripture is not the historical Buddha, as in most sūtras, but the Buddha
Vairocana, a symbolic personification of the dharmadhātu. This and other symbols are
used to convey the Buddha’s experience of awakening.

Huayan describes four patterns of thinking corresponding to four stages of develop-
m ent towards awakening. In each stage, one perceives a particular aspect of the
dharmadhātu:

1  perceiving the dharmadhātu as fragmentary phenomena. This is the ordinary view
of the world in which elements of existence are accepted as real and independent.
We might call this a naïve realist view. The metaphor used to describe it is of one
perceiving each wave in the ocean as a separate entity.
2  perceiving the dharmadhātu as empty. In this state, the world is viewed through
intuition. It appears that an undifferentiated reality sustains phenomena. The met-
aphor is of one perceiving the water of an ocean but not seeing the waves.
3  perceiving the dharmadhātu as the unity of phenomena and emptiness. In this stage
one sees phenomena and emptiness as identical. Only awakened beings can see the
world in this way. The metaphor is of seeing the interdependence of the water and
the waves.
4  perceiving the dharmadhātu as perfect harmony among all phenomena. In this state,
all phenomenal existents are seen as individual but mutually interpenetrating to
form a whole. That is, one perceives dependent co-arising in empirical reality. The
metaphor says one sees that waves are manifestations of water working in harmony
with one another as well as the whole.

While the first three stages are found in other Mahāyāna traditions, the fourth is an
innovation by Chengguan (738–839), regarded as the fourth patriarch of Huayan.
Huayan claims that it is the most complete teaching because the fourth stage goes
beyond theoretical understandings of emptiness and perceives the world as an organic
unit. The Flower Garland Sūtra describes this ecology, wherein each element interacts
harmoniously with all others, with the metaphor of Indra’s Net. The universe is likened
to a divine fishing net of infinite expanse. In each of its knots is a shining jewel like the
stars in the heavens. While each jewel shines uniquely and with change, it simultane-
ously reflects each and every other jewel. The metaphor illustrates the ideas of empti-
ness, dependent co-arising, and interpenetration central to the tradition.

Huayan developed two theories of causation: dharmadhātu dependent co-arising
(法界緣起 Ch. fa jie yuan qi; Jp. hōkai-engi) and tathāgatagarbha dependent co-
arising (如来缘起 Ch. ru lai yuan qi; Jp. nyorai-zō engi). Indian Buddhist traditions and Tiantai had referred to the ten realms causation theory wherein karma was thought to play out diachronically and on an individual scale. In contrast, dharmadhātu dependent co-arising theory conceptualized causation as occurring synchronically, trans-individually, and on a cosmic scale.

Tathāgatagarbha dependent co-arising sees causation in relation to buddha-nature, the potential for awakening in all beings. Accordingly, we are all innately awakened but suffer because of our ignorance of this. That being the premise, causation is seen as occurring due to the combination of these two factors, human and buddha action. Dharmadhātu dependent co-arising is a vision of cosmic harmony. Tathāgatagarbha dependent co-arising is about interrelational harmony among beings. Both causation theories were expounded by Fazang (643–712), the famous third patriarch of Huayan. Huayan’s emphasis on interconnectedness and universal accord had strong appeal to East Asian sensibilities. Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, its popular message of harmony was seized upon as a means of expanding political influence. Rulers in China, Japan, and Korea sponsored construction projects for large statues of Huayan’s universal Buddha Vairocana, seeking to be associated with its power. The face of the Vairocana at China’s Longmen grottoes is said to have been modeled in the likeness of Empress Wu Zetian (reigned 690–705).

For some time, Chinese Buddhists debated over two storehouse-consciousness theories that seemed to be opposites. While Faxiang’s ālayavijñāna theory said there is a repository for defilement at the base of human consciousness, tathāgatagarbha theorists claimed the foundation of all beings is the innate womb of buddhahood. The argument harkened back to the time of Mencius and classical debates over whether human nature is good or evil. The solution seemed to be found in a text known as the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna (大乘起信論 Ch. Dasheng qixin lun). The text is attributed to the renowned Indian writer Asvaghosa (c. 80–150 CE). It was said to have been translated into Chinese first by Paramārtha (499–569) and subsequently by Śīkṣānanda (652–710). However, many scholars today believe it is an apocryphal text composed in China, perhaps by Paramārtha. The text claims that consciousness contains both tathatā and ālaya, that tathatā has a potential “perfuming” power to cleanse defilement stored in the ālaya, and that we should have faith in this power of tathatā. Commented on and embraced by Fazang, this explanation and the text itself became extremely influential in shaping East Asian Buddhism, even among theorists who acknowledged its likely Chinese origin.

Zhenyan (真言; Jp. Shingon)

The name Zhenyan means “true word,” in this case referring to mantra. Mantra is a sound or series of sounds chanted in the belief that so doing will bring transformation of consciousness or other desired benefits. Mantra is typically associated with tantric practices, and Zhenyan is the Chinese version of Tantric Buddhism. Zhenyan seeks realization of oneness with the universe. To achieve this, it uses the “three mysteries,” mudrā (hand gestures that are physical symbols), mantra (symbolic vocal sounds), and maṇḍala (visual symbols). These are thought of as mysteries in that the existence of
language, for example, is astonishing, as is its potential to transform consciousness. Practitioners conceptualize ultimate reality symbolically personified as the perfect cosmic being, the Buddha Mahāvairocana. Then, by these three means involving the body, speech, and mind, they visualize being that perfect Buddha, imitating the Buddha with the hand gestures and mantra sounds associated with it, as well as by meditating on its image on the maṇḍala. Thereby, “Becoming the Buddha in this Body” (即身成佛; Jp. sokushin jōbutsu), a concept popularized by the Japanese patriarch Kūkai (774–835), means both to dwell in the dharmadhātu and to realize that reality in the world of saṃsāra.

Zhenyan was transmitted to China by the Indian master Śubhakarasimha in 716 and again by Vajrabodhi (671–741) and his disciple Amoghavajra (705–777) in 719. China received these teachings just as they were developing in India. Of the two main scriptures for Zhenyan, the tradition holds that the Mahāvairocana-sūtra represents the northern Indian Tantric Buddhist tradition, while the Vajraśekhara-sūtra represents the southern Indian tradition. The two are believed to have been united in China as one tradition. While this may be, there were additional tantric traditions in India not transmitted to China. The Chinese monk Huiguo (746–805) mastered the Mahāvairocana-sūtra under the supervision of Śubhakarasimha and the Vajraśekhara-sūtra under Amoghavajra. Afterwards, he rose to prominence in the service of the Chinese court, giving tantric lay initiations and instructions to three emperors; however, after Huiguo’s death, the short-lived tradition faded to obscurity in China and lingered in fragments in Korea. In Japan, however, the Japanese monk Kūkai, who studied under Huiguo, introduced the tradition under the name Shingon, where it became the most affluent school of thought during the early Heian period, perhaps due in no small part to the force of Kūkai’s personality and literary skills. It remains a vital tradition there today.

Shingon does not use the term “tantra” because of the word’s association with sexual and other practices outside its tradition. The tradition prefers it be called mikkyō (密教), the mysterious or esoteric teachings. Shingon considers itself the most philosophical school of Buddhist thought, while qualifying that its system is experiential philosophy. The tradition interprets tathatā as the creative force that is the dharmadhātu. Based on Mahāyāna trīkāya doctrine, Shingon views dharmakāya as the personification of dharmadhātu, which is called Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana. Vairocana Buddha in Huayan and Mahāvairocana in Shingon are both dharmakāya buddhas. However, in the Huayan conception, integration with Vairocana is based on causality. This is dramatized in Huayan’s Flower Garland Sūtra as the seeker Suddhana passing through 53 causal stages in order to actualize the resultant dharmadhātu. Shingon speaks of buddha-mind (bodhicitta) as a quality sentient beings share with Mahāvairocana. From the perspective of sentient beings, bodhicitta is buddha-potential, just like tathāgatagarbha. But, while Huayan requires practice to realize buddha-potential, Shingon believes potential itself has the power to destroy delusion. Practice is considered the means through which the potential is manifested. That is to say, one manifests buddhahood bodily (sokushin-jōbutsu), by cultivating the merit of Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana with body (mudrā), speech (mantra), and mental visualization (maṇḍala). Thus, Shingon does not speak of causality as Huayan does. It deals directly with the resultant realm.
Shingon agrees with the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* in its analysis of *tathatā* in three categories: its body or essence, its marks or attributes, and its function or practices for cultivating and manifesting its merits. The body of *tathatā*, of Dharmakīya Mahāvairocana, which is also the universe, is composed of six physical elements. Its attributes are expressed in the iconography of two maṇḍalas. Its function is manifested through the three mysteries practices.

While Empedocles conceived of four elements composing the world, Pythagoreans, Aristotle, the *Upaniṣads*, Sāṃkhya, and Vaiśeṣika philosophers saw five. Shingon regards *tathatā* as being comprised of six elements: space, wind, fire, water, earth, and mind. All things arise in combinations of these and disassemble again as them. Mahāvairocana and our identity as universal combinations of the six elements are realized through highly symbolic sets of ideas, sounds, and actions. The elements themselves become symbolic. Each also has a corresponding mantrā sound, a shape, a direction, and an associated image of a buddha or bodhisattva representative. The unity of these elements is, again, the dharmadhātu, the universe, Mahāvairocana, and human beings. Actualizing the realization of this is the goal.

While the Mahāvairocana-sūtra proceeds within the Madhyamaka contexts of emptiness and dependent co-arising, the Vajraśekhara-sūtra deals with the mind in reference to transformation, as in Yogācāra. Shingon blends Yogācāra and Madhyamaka theory by referring to awakening buddha-mind together with the emptiness and dependent co-arising of the six elements. Since our bodies are comprised of the temporary associations of these elements and after death will dissipate into new associations of them, Shingon grave markers or stupas (Jp. *gorin hōō*) reflect this process in various symbols. The six elements are also variously illustrated in Shingon’s two maṇḍalas, which included intricate relationships among these elements, buddhas, directions, colors, mudrās, and mantras. The Garbhakośadhātu Maṇḍala or Womb Realm Maṇḍala is also known as the Truth Maṇḍala. The Vajradhātu Maṇḍala or Diamond Realm Maṇḍala is known as the Wisdom Maṇḍala. These represent two aspects of Mahāvairocana in numerous ways. The Truth Maṇḍala is female; the Wisdom Maṇḍala is male. The former represents the first five of the six elements; the latter represents the sixth. Truth is the known; Wisdom is the knower. Receiving initiations into the two maṇḍala realms and uniting these through the practice of three mysteries, Shingon followers realize the oneness of the universe.

Pure Land (ግིས་ཀྱིས་ Ch. *Jingtūzōng*; Jp. *Jōdo*; K. *Jeongtojong*)

Pure Land was systematized as a separate tradition of Buddhism in China. While most of its scriptures were written in India, commentaries on them were written in China and rival schools of Pure Land developed throughout East Asia. The True Pure Land Tradition (Jōdo Shinshū) is the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan today. It is a devotional type of Buddhism concerned with a person’s salvation in paradise after death and sometimes with creating a utopian society in the here and now. Other devotional types of Buddhism existed in East Asia before the development of Pure Land, which eventually replaced them. It may be that the Pure Land was first conceived not
as a final heavenly paradise, but as a Land of Purification where one could temporarily live away from the degenerate world in order to work towards nirvāṇa.

Gyōnen (1240–1321) and other historians divided Japanese Buddhist traditions into two broad groups. Those that advocate meditation, the study of sūtras or engagement in other practices for awakening are classified as traditions of jiriki, self-power. Those that focus on devotion to a savior are called traditions of tariki, other-power. The other-power in the case of Pure Land is that of the Buddha Amitābha. Although it may seem at first glance that this defies the spirit of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhists point out that belief in one’s own power is egotistical. Accordingly, if Buddhists truly want to destroy their false image of the self, they must give up the notion that it is powerful and capable of salvation. For Pure Land Buddhists, letting go of attachment to the ego by giving oneself up to fate is key. They believe our actions are guided in the main by past karma, which determines the direction of our lives to a large degree.

Pure Land traditions rely chiefly on three texts for their doctrinal basis. These are the Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life (Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra), the Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life (Amitābha Sūtra), and the Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra, also called the Meditation Sūtra because it describes a series of contemplations on the Buddha Amitāyus. In the Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life, a bodhisattva named Dharmākara makes various vows to help all sentient beings realize salvation from suffering. Afterwards he transforms into a buddha called Amitāyus and also named Amitābha, representing two aspects of the Buddha. Amitāyus means “immeasurable life” and represents the Buddha in nirvāṇa. Amitābha means “immeasurable wisdom,” symbolizing the Buddha’s focus on sentient beings. Amitābha is seated in meditation while Amitābha stands and communicates with others. The Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life describes Pure Land as a physical place filled with jewels and ruled by a huge buddha. In this way, these two sūtras can be seen as a pair, one describing the savior Buddha and the other focusing on his kingdom.

Two major Pure Land traditions developed in China based on interpretations of scriptures. The monk Tanluan (476–542) claimed that birth in the Pure Land is achieved through faith in the vow of Amitābha to save all sentient beings. He is credited with having created the expression that is believed to lead to salvation when chanted: “Praise to Amitābha Buddha” (南無阿彌陀佛, Ch. Namo Amitābha; Jp. Namo Amida Butsu; K. Namu Amita Bul). Known as the nianfo (Jp. Nembutsu; K. yeombul), use of this phrase became standard among Pure Land traditions, although interpretations of how properly to employ it vary. Later, Shandao (613–681) claimed that even wicked beings can enter the Pure Land by repeating the nianfo.

In Japan, the first major figure to promote Pure Land Buddhism was Hōnen (1133–1212). The decline of aristocratic culture in his time brought a corresponding loss of interest in Buddhist doctrine, its unwieldy rituals, and corrupt priests behind the scenes at court. There was a widespread belief that the world had entered the degenerative era (末法, Ch. mofa; Jp. mappō), described in Pure Land and other sūtras as a time when people can no longer understand or practice the teachings of the Buddha. Accordingly, in this age one can rely only on the vow of a savior buddha for salvation from suffering. In Hōnen’s time, repeating the nembutsu gained popularity among ordinary people outside the religious establishments. This annoyed the priests of the traditional temples in Kyoto, who pressured the government to ban the practice and banish Hōnen from
the city. Hōnen’s most influential follower was Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, “the True Pure Land Tradition,” also called Shin or Shin Buddhism. Whereas Hōnen taught that a person should repeat the nembutsu endlessly as a way to call on the savior Buddha, Shinran believed it should be repeated as thanks to Amitābha, who inevitably saves all people on account of his vow to do so. Taking the belief to its logical extreme, Shinran taught that an individual’s deeds and past misdeeds have nothing to do with going to the Pure Land, since Amitābha vowed to save all sentient beings.

In Korea today, most Buddhist temples have a Pure Land devotional area as well as places for meditation and doctrinal study.

Chan (禅 Jp. Zen; K. Seon)

Chan and Pure Land traditions are sometimes said to be anti-philosophical, emphasizing instead practices for different reasons respectively. The name Zen is well known outside of Asia, likely due to the disproportionate number of writings about the tradition in European languages in the twentieth century. The name “Zen” is the Japanese reading of the Chinese graph “Chan.” Chan is an abbreviation of “Channa” (那禅), which is a transliteration of the Sanskrit term dhyāna, meaning meditation. Thus, Chan is the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism that points to meditation as its central tenet. Chan meditation is closely related to Indian vipassana. Although the name is derived from Sanskrit, Chan was systematized in East Asia, beginning in China. Tradition says the south Indian monk Bodhidharma (c. fifth–sixth century CE) first transmitted the Chan Dharma to Chinese Buddhists around the year 520. His principle disciple, Huike (487–593), may be responsible for first recording his master’s teachings. Chan has a general disdain for textual study and seeks direct experience of tathātā. It therefore claims the historical Buddha transmitted the tradition from mind to mind without the use of words. That being the case, Chan does not make use of sūtras for doctrinal grounding as do others traditions of Buddhism. Instead, it alleges to be “a special transmission outside the scriptures” (教外別傳 Ch. jiao wai bie zhuan). However, adherents have found several sūtras satisfactory, most notably the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra.

Chan meditation is not aimed at cutting off the empirical world, as some Indian yoga systems may be. On the contrary, it seeks to engage deeply in experience by minimizing mental analysis and evaluation. Because such internal chatter is identified typically as the “self,” Chan seeks to destroy this self as a false construction of what we really are, to end the tyranny of self-reflection. Such thoughts, it is believed, remove us from a more direct experience of reality by imposing endless dualisms, to which we cling, therefore resulting in suffering. The famous Chan saying “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” suggests we should destroy such dualistic evaluations when we come upon them. It is typical of Chan instructions to use shocking images in this way, thereby aiding us in the process of letting go of the cherished notion of self.

Chan does not acknowledge a dichotomy between “enlightenment” and non-enlightenment. Instead of speaking of enlightenment, Chan practitioners seek understanding (悟 Ch. wu; Jp. satori). Specifically, they hope to understand their own nature (見性 Ch. jian xing; Jp. kenshō) through direct experience. Because our nature is
believed to be buddha-nature, seeing into one’s own nature is realizing buddhahood. Related to this emphasis is Chan’s principle of “no dependence upon words and letters” (不立文字 Ch. buli wenzi; Jp. furyū monji). “No dependence upon words and letters” derives from the Madhyamaka notion of non-duality. Referring to the Vimalakirtinirdéśa-sútra, Chan finds a model in the layman Vimalakirti who, through silence, conveys to learned monks that verbal fabrications can only communicate dichotomies. Chan’s practical method for reaching understanding is most notably known in Japanese as zazen (座禅 Ch. zuo chan), seated meditation. According to the tradition, sitting in zazen is itself already reaching the goal, since we are innately buddhas. While seated, practitioners typically place bare attention on breathing while concentrating on a central spot below the navel called in Chinese the dantian (丹田; Jp. tan den; K. dan jeon). Chan meditation in the absence of doctrine is said to be the method for “direct pointing to the human mind” (直指人心 Ch. zhizhi renxin). These four phrases together are said to encapsulate the Chan teachings: “a special transmission outside the scriptures; no dependence upon words and letters; direct pointing to the human mind; seeing into one’s own nature is realizing Buddhahood.”

Many East Asian artists have been attracted to the Chan idea of direct experience, which was widely applied to their practices, among them Noh drama, the Tea Ceremony, and martial arts. Through their interest in Zen, a number of general Buddhist ideas have become important and enduring aesthetic concepts in Japan, including mushin, muj (無常 Ch. wuchang; K. musang), impermanence, and yūgen (幽玄), profound mystery. Zen also appealed to Japanese samurai, who sought to lessen their fear of death through meditation. In China, Chan’s emphasis on “no dependence upon words and letters” may have contributed to its eventual decline. The tradition’s appearance as illogical and indifferent towards the Confucian classics was contrary to the neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty (960–1279). In modern Korea, Seon practitioners have struggled with doctrinal Buddhists and fought against non-celibacy and meat-eating behaviors that were introduced into their order during the Japanese occupation period (1910–45). Contrary to Buddhist vows, those struggles frequently turned violent. Eventually, these conflicts resulted in the creation of the Jogye Order, which is based primarily on Seon practice. Jogye is the largest Buddhist order in Korea today.

Notes

1 This does not treat the ancillary academic traditions, which were once separate (Sattvasiddhi, Mahāyānasangraha, Dilun, Nirvāṇa). The latter aided in the doctrinal formulation of other traditions and were eventually absorbed by them. Nor does it consider the Vinaya and Abhidharma, both having origins in “Hinayāna” Buddhism.
2 Taishō (T) 31, No. 1585, 再唯識論.
3 Xuanzang’s translation can be found as T 16, No. 676.
4 T 24, No. 1484 and T 85, No. 2283.
5 Kumārajīva’s translation is T 30, No. 1564, 中論.
6 Kumārajīva’s translation is T 30, No. 1568, 十二門.
7 Kumārajīva’s translation is T 30, No. 1569, 百論.
8 Kumārajīva’s translation is T 25, No. 1509, 大智度論.
Later, in the time of Śāntarakṣita (c. 725–c. 784) and Kamalaśīla (c. 740–c. 794), these two traditions reunited and focused their criticism instead on Yogācāra.

Skt Mahāprajñāpāramitapadeśa-sūtra by Nāgārjuna. Kumarajiva’s translation is preserved as T 25, No. 1509.

This is expressed in Chinese as jian xing chengfo, 见性成佛.