CHAPTER IV

THE CONCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSE IN THE

AVATAṂSAKA SŪTRA

A vataṃsaka Sūtra mentions universe as Dharmaḥatū – the Dharma-realm that is the relationship and the relativity between all things in the universe.

Dharmaḥatū (Sanskrit) may be defined as the “dimension”, “realm” or “sphere” (dhatu) of Dharma and denotes the collective “one-taste” (Sanskrit: ekarasa) dimension of Dharmata.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, dharmadhātu means “realm of phenomena”, “realm of Truth” and of the noumenon, where Tathatā (Reality “as-it-is”), emptiness, dependent co-arising and the unconditioned, uncreated, perfect and eternal Buddha are one.

a). The Doctrine of Dharmaḥatū

What is Dharmaḥatū? It is usually translated as “realm”. A realm is defined as a territory, sphere, or domain, within which certain activities and thoughts take place according to certain criteria. A realm has its own boundaries or frame of reference under designated conditions. Taking water as an example, ordinary people see water as a liquid for drinking. However, chemists see water as a compound of oxygen and hydrogen; philosophers see water as a matter of
causation, etc. In Buddhism, water is just a name given to one of the manifestations of Dharma nature, or the outflow of supreme Buddhahood. Thus, the functions of water may vary when the frame of reference is set in different ways, or when it is viewed from different perspectives. There are many realms within one single object such as water.

However, it should be noted that though each of the realms has its own activities for water, all the realms can exist simultaneously. This leads to one of the important concepts in Huayan sect, the Doctrine of Simultaneous Arising.

Moreover, these realms do not obstruct or interfere with each other, and mutually penetrate one another in harmony. This leads to another important concept in Huayan sect, the Doctrine of Simultaneous Non-obstruction.

i. Various Views of Dharmadhātu

Dharmadhātu has somewhat different definitions in Mahayana and Theravāda Buddhism. In Sanskrit and Pāli, dhatu means “element” or “property.” The Sanskrit word dharma has several meanings. Here it means “manifestation of reality” (Mahāyāna) or “factors of existence,” the transitory conditions that cause phenomena to come into being (Theravāda). In Theravāda Buddhism, Dharmadhātu (more often spelled “Dhammadhātu” by Theravādins) is the fundamental essence of dharma; the nature of things and how they exist. In
Mahāyāna Buddhism, Dharmadhātu is a matrix, totality, or limitless, all-pervading space in which all phenomena arise, abide, and cease.

In the glossary to The Lotus-Born, Dharmadhātu is defined as: “The ‘realm of phenomena;’ the suchness in which emptiness and dependent origination are inseparable. The nature of mind and phenomena which lies beyond arising, dwelling and ceasing.”

Scott translates Nāgārjuna who links the Dharmadhātu with Nirvāṇa: The Dharmadhātu is the ground for Buddhahood, Nirvāṇa, purity, and permanence. Therefore, Dharmadhātu is the purified mind in its natural state, free of the obscuration rendered by dualism; as well as the essence-quality or nature of mind, indeed the fundamental ground of consciousness of the Trikaya accessed via the mind stream.

Yutang Lin qualifies the dharma in Dharmadhātu, it: ... to spiritual states that transcend senses and consciousness, and are unspeakable or unimaginable. Under this meaning of “dharma” all dharma-s are mutually dependent causes and conditions of their coexistence. Whatever the ordinary worldly view may be, in this sense of “dharma,” all dharma-s are equal as one of the dharma-s and this equality transcends considerations of their differences in being real/unreal, superior/inferior, or abundant/deficient. In this sense of “dharma” the word “dharmadhātu,” literally “realm of dharma-s,” refers to the collection of all dharma-s. “Attainin Buddhahood” or “Attaining Dhammakāya” means having
transcended all and any limitations that are due to artificial concepts, subconscious activities, desires and feelings, will and attachment, time and space, etc., and having regained the original state of Dharmadhātu in harmonious oneness.

To an entity that has realised their Buddha-dhātu or essential Buddha-nature, Dharmadhātu is also referred to as the Dharmakāya, literally “body of Dharma,” of that entity.

Yutang Lin affirms the nonlinear, holistic essence-quality of Dharmadhātu, unbounded by space and time: According to the correct view of Dharmadhātu all dharma-s in the past, all dharma-s at present and all dharma-s in the future are all together in the Dharmadhātu. Dharmadhātu is neither limited by space nor by time.

Scott (1998) translates Nāgārjuna praising Dharmadhātu: As butter, though inherent in the milk is mixed with it and hence does not appear, just so the Dharmadhātu is not seen as long as it is mixed together with afflictions. And just as the inherent butter essence. When the milk is purified is no more disguised, when afflictions have been completely purified, the Dharmadhātu will be without any stain at all.

In this poem, “afflictions” may be understood as dukkha, illusionment (compare Maya) or the non-awareness of rigpa, the primordial and constitutional essence-quality.
Scott translates Nāgārjuna defining Bodhicitta (or heart-mind) as the medium through which Dharmadhātu is perceived and realised: Sentient beings’ essence free of substance is the sphere that is encountered on this plane. Seeing this is the royal Bodhicitta, the Dharmakaya free of every flaw.

Scott translates Nāgārjuna who established a relationship between the Bhumi and Dharmadhātu:

Just as the moon when it is new Visibly grows larger bit by bit, Those who have reached the Bhumi-s see the Dharmakaya more and more.

It is one of the Five Wisdoms (Dharmadhātu wisdom, mirror-like wisdom, equality wisdom, discriminating wisdom and all-accomplishing wisdom). It is the antidote to the poison of delusion. It is associated with Vairocana.

In the Mahāyāna Mahaparinirvāṇa Sūtra, the Buddha states of himself that he is the “boundless Dharmadhātu” - the totality itself.

In Dzogchen text Gold refined from ore the term Dharmadhātu is translated as “total field of events and meanings” or “field of all events and meanings.” Such translation seems to be paralleling a modern Western philosophical approach to Philosophy of time: Eternalism.

The Avatamsaka Sūtra as such, is not a philosophical discourse. It is not so much “about” something, as it is an attempt to portray the cosmos as seen by a Buddha, or very advanced Bodhisattvas. It doesn’t promulgate a systematic
ontology, but rather gives us a description of the phenomenological experience of a Buddha or advanced Bodhisattva. The cosmos as experienced by such a being is called the Dharmadhātu, the “Dharma-Realm.” This is not the cosmos as perceived by un-awakened beings, but is rather the cosmos seen correctly. It is the cosmos where all phenomena are seen as empty, lacking any substantiality or self-nature (svabhava). This cosmos is the Buddha. Clearly know that all Dharma-s Are without any self-essence at all; To understand the nature of dharma-s in this way Is to see Vairocana¹.

ii. The Four Dharmadhātu

The doctrine of Huayen is based on the theory of causation by the universal principle, or called Dharmadhātu in Sanskrit, i.e. Dharma Realm.

For the two aspects of all Dharma-s, both 'Li' and 'Shih' are interpenetrated with each other, and all phenomena are mutually identified. All phenomena are the manifestations of noumenon, and each individual phenomenon embraces every other phenomenon. Thus, the Four Dharmadhātu are identified.

“Dharmadhātu is the realm of reality in which all Dharma-s or things in the universe arise simultaneously. In other words, it is the creation of the universe by

¹ Vairocana Buddhas, The Buddha of Great-illumination. This is the True-Body-of-Form of Buddha Gautama Sakyamuni.
the universe itself. Furthermore, according to the classification of Huayan school, this Dharmadhātu can be divided into four fold\(^2\).

1) The Dharmadhātu of “Shih”. This is a realm of phenomena, in which all things are seen as distinct, discrete and different objects, matter, events and Dharma-s occur in the empirical worlds.

2) The Dharmadhātu of “Li”. This is a realm, in which the principles underlying all phenomena and the immanent reality upholding all Dharma-s are seen. It is a realm beyond the perceptions of human beings, but can be visualized by the enlightened ones through intuition.

3) The Dharmadhātu of Non-obstruction of “Li” against “Shih”. This is a realm, in which “Li” and “Shih” are regarded as the inseparable unity. That means, without one, the other would be meaningless. They are mutually interpenetrating and completely identical, i.e. they are non-dual.

4) The Dharmadhātu of Non-obstruction of “Shih against Shih”. This is the ultimate and the only Dharmadhātu that truly exists, as the first three Dharmadhātu are merely explanatory expediencies to approach this realm. In this realm, each and every individual “Shih” enters into and merges with all other “Shih” in perfect freedom, without the aid of “Li”.

This idea of Dharmadhātu-pratītyasamutpāda which was originally found in the Avatamsaka-sūtra or Huayen jing, was fully developed by the Huayen school into a systematic doctrine palatable to the Chinese intellectual taste. The Dharmadhātu doctrine can be said to have been, by and large, set forth by Tu-shun (557~640 C.E.), formulated by Chih-yen (602~668), systematized by Fa-tsang (643~712), and elucidated by Ch’eng-kuan (ca. 737~838) and Tsung-mi (780~841).

The foundation of the Dharmadhātu doctrine was definitely laid in a short treatise, Fa-chieh-kuan-men (The Gate of Insight into the Dharmadhātu), which has been ascribed to Tu-shun, the first patriarch of the school. In this “fundamental text” it is recommended to have “threelfold insight” into the Dharmadhātu, i.e., the insight into 1) the “true Emptiness,” 2) the “non-obstruction of li and shih” or noumenon and phenomena, and 3) “all-pervading and all-embracing [nature of phenomena] . This means that in our meditative insight we have to intuit not only the two aspects of Dharmadhātu, form (rūpa) and emptiness (śūnyatā), in their non-obstructive interrelationship but we have also to see the Dharmadhātu in terms of li and shih or the noumenal and the phenomenal in their “interfusion and dissolution, coexistence and annihilation, adversity and harmony” and their mutual identification. Even further, we are advised to realize ultimately that “shih, being identified with li, are interfusing, interpervading, mutually including, and interpermeating without obstruction.” It is said here that all the phenomenal things, having been endowed with the quality of the noumenal, are now complete.
in themselves, and thus they are now interrelating with each other. In this relationship, it is further said, the universal and the particular, the broad and the narrow, and the like, have no impeding boundaries but are freely interpenetrating each other without obstruction or hindrance whatsoever.

This last insight into the universal and inexhaustible interrelatedness of all the Dharma-s in the Dharmadhātu was formulated as the “ten mysteries” by the second patriarch Chih-yen in his Huayen I-ch’eng shih-hsūan-men (The Ten Mysteries of the One Vehicle of the Huayan). These ten mysteries or principles, according to Chih-yen, point to the Huayan truth that the myriad things in the universe freely interrelate with each other without losing their own identities. Each and every manifested object of the Dharmadhātu includes simultaneously all the qualities of the other objects within itself. Consequently all the qualities such as hidden and manifest, pure and mixed, one and many, subtle and minute, cause and effect, big and small, time and eternity, and the rest are all simultaneously and completely compatible in any given dharma.

Fa-tsang, the third patriarch and greatest systematizer of the school, having inherited this basic teaching of Chih-yen, organized it within his finely refined theoretical system. While Chih-yen’s “ten mysteries” had been simply set forth without elaboration, Fa-tsang incorporated the truth of the ten mysteries in the web of his grand system. It is no longer an isolated set of meditational items, but becomes part of an organic structure substantiated in terms of “emptiness and
existence," “having power and lacking power,” and so on. It is also by him that the cardinal twin principle of Huayan philosophy “mutual identification” and “interpenetration” is first clearly systematized in connection with ideas of “essence and function” (t’i-yung).

It was the fourth patriarch of the school, Ch’eng-kuan, who built up the so-called theory of “four-fold Dharmadhātu” upon the basis of the teachings handed down by his predecessors, which subsequently became known as the standard formula of the Huayan Dharmadhātu doctrine. In his Fa-chieh-hsüan-ching (The Mirror of the Mystery of Dharmadhātu), the commentary on Tu-shun’s Fa-chieh-kuan-men, Ch’eng-kuan suggests that the Dharmadhātu can be seen either as 1) shih Dharmadhātu, 2) li Dharmadhātu, 3) Dharmadhātu of non-obstruction of li and shih, or 4) Dharmadhātu of non-obstruction of shih and shih. According to his explanation, the first one is the Dharmadhātu particularized or phenomenalized into innumerable concrete things. The second one, li Dharmadhātu, is the “essential” aspect of the Dharmadhātu which is the foundation of all the manifested phenomena. The third one is the aspect of the Dharmadhātu in which phenomena and noumenon interfuse each other. The fourth dimension of the Dharmadhātu, according to Ch’eng-kuan, points to the truth of the “ten mysteries,” which teaches basically the twin principle of interrelationship of all phenomena: mutual identification and interpenetration. The Dharmadhātu doctrine of Tsung-mi is more or less similar to that of Ch’eng-kuan.
All Dharma-s are based on the causes and conditions. For example, one dharma is base on the other, this dharma arise, so does the other. Then, it is said that all the existence is dependent arising. According to Huayen school, the Dharma Realm is in totality a world of dependent arising, which does not only come from the power of karma or only from the Ālayavijñāna on the Bhuta tathatā. The hundreds and thousands of Dharma-s are causes and conditions to one another, dependent on one another, and mutually relating one another to the infinite. The key role of the dependent arising is Ālaya vijnana for the vijñāna school, the karma for the Dharmalaksana School and the Bhuta tathatā for the Dharmata school. The Huayen school covers all of those three view points and its perspective of the existence is named as the Dharma realm interdependent origination.

Dharma Realm’s interdependent origination is the perspective with which Hua-yen school looks at the world, or say, its view of the existence in the universe.

The founder of Huayen sect, Tu-shun, established the Three Points of Views of Dharmadhātu:

The View of True Emptiness and phenomena in Dharmadhātu arise either by causal conditions or dependent conditions. They have no self-nature. They 'return' to the equal and true Emptiness eventually. Their existence with respect to the senses and consciousness of beings is an illusion, just like the flowers in the sky.
The View of Non-obstruction between “Li” and “Shih” to view that the real nature of matters and phenomena is so-called “True Suchness” or “Li”, which has twofold meanings, one is the “Unchanged” and the other the “Accord with Conditions”. The former is its body while the latter is its manifestation / functions. As the True Suchness is unchanged in nature, it can manifest in accordance with conditions and produce all Dharma-s or “Shih”. Thus, there is no obstruction between “Li” and “Shih”.

If “The Dharmadhātu of Non-obstruction of shih Against shih” (li shih wu ai) points to the simultaneous presence of inter-subjectivity and individual phenomena, then “The Dharmadhatu of Non-obstruction of shih Against shih” (shih shih wu ai) carried the insight further by pointing to the presence of all in one and one in all without the loss of individuality due to the emptiness of all Dharma-s. The “Formation of Worlds” chapter of the Flower Garland states: “Thus does infinity enter into one, Yet each unit is distinct with no overlap.” and “In each atom are congregations numerous as atoms...Yet with no crowding or confusion.” How can we possibly make sense of this or even imagine it? Once again, Fa-tsang made recourse to the analogy of the golden lion. Each part of the lion (tail, teeth, ears, paws, etc...) makes no sense apart from the whole and each part lends its support to the whole. Without the context of the lion, the tail would no longer be a tail but simply a squiggle of gold. Likewise, without the coordination of parts, there would be no whole to support the individual members.
Because of this mutual support of the whole and its parts, one contains the all and is contained by the all.

The View of Universal Inclusion to view that all Dharma-s are manifestations of the True Suchness, which is the indivisible nature of all Dharma-s. In other words, each Dharma consists of the complete and perfect nature of True Suchness. Thus all Dharma-s are mutually inter-penetrated and mutually identical. Each Dharma has non-obstruction to all other Dharma indefinitely. They are universally inclusive to each other. You are part of me and I am part of you.

These patriarchs have emphasized throughout their writings that everything in the universe is related to each other. Apart from this relatedness, or what is technically called Pratītyasamutpāda, nothing has an existence of its own. Everything should be viewed with regard to all possible relationships with all possible things. Every possible level and every available dimension should be applied to a certain thing. In other words, any given object in the world is subject to infinitely numerous and different frames of reference. Nothing can have a fixed, intrinsic, or static value nor be judged by a determined standard. Everything in the phenomenal order is fluid, flexible, and relative.

The same step is too high for a child and at the same time too low for an adult. The same step is also too wide for a child and too narrow for an adult. The same step has, therefore, according to Huayen, the qualities of being high and low, wide and narrow, and so on, all simultaneously. The truth of the “ten mysteries”
lies in its pointing out these relativistic or relationalistic qualities of all Dharma-s. All Dharma-s are free from being either narrow or broad; they are both narrow and broad, and many more without obstruction. This is the so-called mystery of “the sovereignty and non-obstruction of the broad and the narrow.” The truth of “the perfect and brilliant compatibility of the qualities of being both the primary and the secondary” conclusively affirms this relativistic outlook of Huayen philosophy.

In such a transcendental insight, there can be no room for dogmatic assertions concerning any particular thing. A theoretical polarity of good and bad, right and wrong, happy and unhappy, profane and sacred, and the like is completely removed. Static views (dṛṣṭi) or dogmas have no place in such a flexible and comprehensive attitude toward Dharma-s.

Those things which have been seen by common-sense knowledge as essentially distinctive, categorically different, and spatiotemporally separate from each other are, here in this Huayen meditative intuition of a higher level, completely dissolved into the totalistic harmony of the Dharmadhātu of non-obstruction and non-hindrance. There is only “the one unique reality” in which every fixed distinction, discrimination or particularization has no room.

Huayen philosophy is in this sense a philosophy of liberation which sets a person free from all rigid and stubborn dogmatism, prejudice, and preconception. The restraint and bondage of localization, categorization, artificial restriction,
conceptual construction, sentimental bias, provincialism, intolerant self-centeredness, and worldly attachment, are all broken down and there remains only absolute spiritual freedom which keeps one from partial judgment but leads to a perfect and round perspective of things.

**iii. Four Approaches to the Dharmadhātu**

First is the ordinary experience of existence that reveals the “realm of phenomena” (Chinese: shih), or the myriad Dharma-s. According to Huayan, this is the vision of the cosmos with which the early Buddhist tradition, such as Theravāda, works in order to gain Nirvāna by the purification of the negative phenomena in one’s consciousness.

Second is the experience of existence that reveals the emptiness of all phenomena, the true suchness of all things. This is the “realm of principle” (Chinese: li), with which Mahāyāna works in order to attain Buddhahood. Through this second vision, one realizes that the real and inherent “principle,” or nature of things, is always pure. While phenomena may be either pure or impure, in essence they are empty of the independent nature one conceives them to have. Realizing this emptiness, the dependent arising of existence, reveals the inherent purity as the Buddha-nature of all phenomena. This inherent purity as the principle of existence is likened to a clear mirror. While the mirror may reflect pure and impure images, its essential clarity is never lost.
The third experience of the cosmos is “the realm of the non-obstruction between principle (li) and phenomena (shih).” This non-obstruction refers to the fundamental Mahayana identity of emptiness with phenomena, or Nirvāna with samsāra. For Huayan, these two aspects of reality “interpenetrate” such that the essential purity of suchness is not lost, and the diversity of dependently arisen phenomena is maintained.

Finally we arrive at the fourth experience of the cosmos in which one sees “the realm of the non-obstruction between phenomena (shih and shih).” Here, we are not looking at the relationship between emptiness and phenomena, but at the relationship between the phenomena themselves. For Huayan, the vision of this non-obstruction reveals that the dependent arising of all phenomena exists as a totality of dynamic interrelatedness. It also reveals that the phenomena making up this totality are related to one another by what Huayan calls “mutual identification” and “mutual penetration.

Specifically, Huayan was interested in the interrelatedness of what is called the Dharmadhātu, the “realm of all Dharma-s,” or the totality of the cosmos. In the devotional writings based on the Avatamsaka Sutra, Huayan taught that the great Dharmadhātu is itself the very body of Vairocana Buddha. Therefore, to realize the true nature or suchness of the cosmos is to discover the Buddha-nature of all existence. In its philosophical writings, again based on the Avatamsaka Sūtra, Huayan taught that the totality of the Dharmadhātu arises in an interdependence
that is wondrous and harmonious. When one sees this marvelous harmony, one generates a deeper commitment to living the Bodhisattva Path in a way that embodies that harmony in daily life. Huayen sought to explain its experience of this wondrous vision of the cosmos in order to help Buddhists attain a liberating insight into the harmonious nature of the Dharmadhātu.

Moreover, these realms do not obstruct or interfere with each other, and mutually penetrate one another in harmony. This leads to another important concept in Huayen sect, the Doctrine of Simultaneous Non-obstruction.

**b. Non-obstruction and Totality**

The theme of Huayen philosophy hinges upon the concept of Dharmadhātu. However, the concept of Non-obstruction and that of Totality are the most significant characteristics in Dharmadhātu.

Non-obstruction can generally be defined as the complete freedom from all bindings, and the infinite possibilities of interpenetrations among the realms, despite of the variations in space and time. Totality can generally be defined as all-embracing and all-merging aspects of all realms. The two concepts can be applied to Buddha-nature.

Non-obstruction, in Huayen's doctrine, has a broader meaning of “boundary wall”, because the “walls” can be intangible, abstract and submissive, yet they have a definitely restricting or limiting function. For ordinary people, they have to
break through the “walls” in order to shift from one realm to another. As they use to do and think from one particular viewpoint or in a designated framework in the mundane world, they may require great effort and patience, insight and wisdom to break through the ‘walls” or remove the “blockages”. A complete removal of the “blocking walls” in the way of Totality will enable one to reach the realm of Non-obstruction, which are again the goal and the core of Huayen.

The concept of Non-obstruction is developed from the doctrine of Emptiness, because only the Emptiness has no boundary wall by itself, thus no obstruction at all. One should have a thorough understanding of the doctrine of Emptiness in order to realize the truth of Non-obstruction.

The third Dharmadhātu in Du Shun's scheme is where shi and shi interpenetrate each other without hindrance. The formulation of this Dharmadhātu is characteristically a Huayen seal. Here the element of “li” recedes to the background and shi takes center stage. There are ten aspects of interpenetration between shi and shi: li resembling shi; shi resembling li ; shi containing “li” and “shi” without obstructions; noninterference between universality and particularity; noninterference between extension and restriction; noninterference between pervading and containing; noninterference between subsuming and entering; communion without hindrance; mutual inherence without interference; universal merging without obstruction.
The formulation of the third Dharmadhātu sets out to resolve the dilemma of the seeming incompatibility between the non-obstructed interpenetration and the retention of the original status of both li and shi, or between the nonidentity and the non-distinction of “li” and “shi”. Since the theorization of the Dharmadhātu in Huayen is based upon that which is perceived, not inferred, a legitimate question arises: In what state can one perceive the impossible, namely that “li” and shi both interpenetrate each other without obstruction and yet keep their original status, and that the two are neither identical with nor distinct from each other.

This state is not an ordinary kind of perception, but rather a special kind of meditative experience. This meditative state is what Huayen calls the “Ocean-Seal Samādhi” mentioned above. It is “not just any samādhi, but the sāgara-mudrā samādhi, the samādhi which is like the images in the ocean, which was the samādhi in which the newly enlightened Buddha beheld the entire universe as one living organism of identical and interdependent parts.”

From the perspective of an enlightened one, according to the Huayen teaching, the world is itself the very world within which all beings share a common experience and a common destiny.

We share the experience of suffering, but we are together headed toward a common destiny, namely, enlightenment. Because of the infinite interpenetration of all, however, suffering and enlightenment likewise interpenetrate. This is
tantamount to saying that suffering is no different from enlightenment and enlightenment is no different from suffering, echoing the well-known Mādhyamika motto: nirvāṇa is saṃsāra and saṃsāra is nirvāṇa.

It is important to recognize, however, the fact that the Huayen philosophers do not abandon the doctrine of anātman, but rather further it by working out what is involved in the experience of anātman. According to them, what is at stake is the possibility of knowing all. In the process, they avoid a purely negative formulation of anātman. Hence, their challenge to anātman is not doctrinal, but methodological. Only when one becomes all-knowing can one truly embrace and verify the principle of anātman, since in such a state there is nothing that can obstruct anything from being known completely. This is the non-dual position maintained by the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, to which Huayen belongs. A person who embodies such an experience is a Buddha, an enlightened one.

c. Mutual Penetration and Mutual Identity

The Huayen philosophy can be summarized in two basic principles, namely the Principle of Mutual Penetration and the Principle of Mutual Identity.

The former corresponds to the Principle of Dependent Arising that all things depend upon one another for their existence (and functions) and extinction. In Huayen's doctrine, it has a broader meaning, such as simultaneously mutual arising, simultaneously mutual entering, and simultaneously mutual containment.
The latter is almost an equivalent of the Heart Sutra's dictum that “Form is Emptiness, and Emptiness is Form”. They are mutually identical, and in compliance with the Principle of Non-duality.

Based on these theories, Huayen doctrines create the most magnificent scale in the cosmic world:

1) The universe can be infinitely large or small in a relative sense, depending on how you measure it.

2) The “larger” universe (such as the solar system) embraces the “smaller” ones (such as the atoms). It is just like a structure extending in infiniteness in both directions to the infinitely large or infinitely small.

3) The “smaller” universe (such as the tip of tiny hair), not only contains the infinite “lesser” universe within itself, but also contains the infinite “large” universe (such as the Three Thousand Worlds).

4) “Time” is no longer a concept of the flowing of events in the past, present and future, as all these events are totally inter-penetrated in the “eternal present”.

The mutual identification of all things does not imply a kind of static identification by which one might say, for example, that fire is the same as ice. Rather, in the Huayen vision, all phenomena in the cosmos are dependently arising together simultaneously. Each phenomenon provides a condition for the arising of
the whole cosmos, and the particular totality of the cosmos is dependent on the conditions provided by all of its parts. If one part, one thing, was different or not present, the totality would itself be different. In dependent arising, each phenomenon plays an identical role in the mutual forming of the universe....In realizing this mutual identification, a person discovers that he or she owes his or her existence to countless beings throughout the universe. This discovery gives one a deeper sense of gratitude and respect for other beings. One also feels a deeper sense of responsibility for how one uses his or her existence, given its effect on the universe. This discovery will also give one a greater aspiration to benefit all living beings (Bodhicitta).

The worlds of noumenon and phenomena interfused and all phenomena interdependent and interpenetrating are represented symbolically in the Huayen Sūtra by such images as Buddha’s pores each containing innumerable lands, with each atom in those lands also containing innumerable lands, each land containing innumerable Buddha-s, and so on, ad infinitum. This illustrates the infinite mutual interrelation of all things. The principle of all things reflecting or “containing” one another is also symbolized by the so-called “Net of Indra”, which is an imaginary net of jewels that reflect each other with the reflections of each jewel containing reflections of all the jewels, each of which reflection also contains the reflections of all the jewels, ad infinitum.
To illustrate the world of all phenomena interdependent and interpenetrating in which nothing can exist interpenetrating in which nothing can exist independently, the following verses from the Sutra, book 20_Eulogies in the palace of the Suyama Heaven, will be the persuasive confirmation.

All the solid elements
Have no independent existence
Yet are found everywhere
So are does the Buddha-body
Pervade all worlds
Its various physical forms
Without abode or origin

In this way, the Buddha-body can permeate all places with various physical forms without any obstructions. In the world of all phenomena interdependent and interpenetrating the space has no longer sense, since a small room like Vimalakīrti’s room can contain thirty-two thousand lion seats without the slightest crowding or obstruction.

“The rich man Vimalakīrti then exercised his transcendental power and at once that Buddha dispatch thirty-two thousand lion seats, tall, broad, adorned and pure, and had them brought into Vimalakīrti’s room, where the Bodhisattavas major disciples, Indra-s, Brahmas. Four Heavenly kings and the other saw something they had never seen before. For the room was broad and spacious.

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3 The Flower Ornament Scripture, Thomas Clearly, vol.1, p.450
enough to hold all these thirty-two thousand lion seats without the slighest crowding or hindrance. The city of Vaisali and Jambudvipa and the other of the four continents too seemed in no way cramped or inconvenienced, but all appeared just as usual\footnote{Vimalakirti Sutra, Burton Watson, p.77}.

It is not only the space, but also the time is meaningless and unrestricted in the world of noninterference among phenomena. A Bodhisattva can extend seven days into a kalpa and similarly he can compress a kalpa into seven days as illustrated in the following passage,

Again, Sariputta, suppose there are beings who went to live in this world for a long time but are qualified to enter enlightenment. This Bodhisattva can stretch seven days into a kalpa, so that to those beings they really seem like a whole kalpa. Or if there are beings who do not went to live in this world for long and they are qualified to enter enlightenment this Bodhisattva can squeeze a kalpa into seven days, so that to those beings it seems like only seven days\footnote{Ibid, p.79}.

\section*{d. Fa-tsang’s Hall of Mirror}

In order to help Empress Wu Tse-tien to understand the principle of totality, the great master Fa-tsang led her into a room lined with mirrors. He fixed the huge mirrors on all four walls, on the ceiling and the floor, all facing one another. He then placed a statue of Buddha at the center of the room with a candle
beside it. The Empress was immediately inspired, and managed to visualize the Principle of Totality and the principle of Non-Obstruction. With the infinite inter-reflections among all the mirrors, the Buddha's images are found in the reflections in each mirror for all other mirrors, together with the specific Buddha's image in each particular one, which are also found in turn in every reflection of any other mirror. It demonstrates the Principle of Mutual Penetration and the Principle of Mutual Identity.

The idea of mutual penetration takes this notion of mutual identification a step further. In the Huayan teaching about the mutual penetration of phenomena, we find the high point of Huayan experience that has been so important to defining East Asian Buddhism....Fa-tsang says that even though the forms of life are distinct, they also interpenetrate so that they “contain” each other. By this he means that in dependent arising, the very presence of each phenomenon influences or conditions the other phenomena of the cosmos. The conditioning influence of one phenomenon “enters” into all other phenomena, Fa-tsang says, like reflections of objects enter a mirror. Note here that Fa-tsang does not say that the phenomena physically enter each other.

The situation is dire, but not without hope. Shih shih wu ai may imply mutual arising or destruction, but it should also be remembered that li shih wu ai implies a universe wherein the ultimate principle is reflected endlessly in all phenomena throughout the universe. In this case the principle of emptiness, or
inter-subjectivity, refers to the inherent capacity of compassion and wisdom in a universe wherein all phenomena mutually arise, contain and support one another. At some point self-understanding naturally breaks through into an intimate feeling and compassion for all things which are, after all, one's very own and to which one belongs. Thus, emptiness is also the principle of compassion and wisdom inherent in the very nature of an inter-subjective universe, and in this sense we can understand the assertion of Vairocana Buddha in the Flower Garland that "The Buddha body extends throughout all the great assemblies; It fills the cosmos without end. Quiescent, without essence, it can not be grasped; It appears just to save all beings." Fa-tsang showed this through a series of mirrors reflecting one another just as all phenomena do in their mutual arising; and in the midst, a candle like the all pervading light of Vairocana endlessly reflected within them; and in the center a crystal reflecting all the mirrors just as Vairocana contains all the worlds within the reality of wisdom and compassion.

In Huayen practice, tranquility meditation is used to enable a person to find emptiness as the quiescent nature of all things. This leads to detachment and inner calm in the midst of the world. Then through insight meditation one sees this emptiness functioning as the forms of the world. This functioning is experienced as an interpenetrating, fascinating, and wonderful matrix of dependent arising. This insight, in turn, leads to a rejection of world renunciation and a compassion for all living beings who fail to see this hidden harmony and are caught in afflictive mental formations. Thereby, one dwells spiritually neither in samsara nor
Nirvana but courses freely as a bodhisattva in the matrix of the cosmos seeking the benefit of others.

This doctrine of interdependence is also reflected in Fazang’s thoughts on Bodhicitta (mental dedication to helping all sentient beings and attaining enlightenment). Following the logic that each element pervades all that exists and itself contains all other elements in the phenomenal world, “In practicing the virtues, when one is perfected, all are perfected,” he writes, “and when one first arouses the thought of enlightenment one also becomes perfectly enlightened” (trans. Wright). Fazang’s emphasis on the omniversal generative power of the tathagatagarbha, the “womb of Buddhahood,” while not unique, subsequently developed into an important concept in the East Asian Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

e. Indra’s Net

This inspired trope “the net of Indra” pictures a universe in which each constituent of reality is like a multifaceted jewel placed at one of the knots of a vast net. There is such a jewel at each knot, and each jewel reflects not only the rest of the jeweled net in its entirety but also each and every other jewel in its individuality. Thus, each particular reflects the totality, the totality so reflected is both a unity and a multiplicity...All things and beings, Huayen teaches, are like this net.
Obviously, the Huayen philosophy fits hand in glove with the Bodhisattvic ideal of human life. No one can gain spiritual freedom independently of others. The organically interconnected texture of the universe makes this impossible. Thus Huayen universalizes and firmly establishes the Bodhisattvic vision of the truly good life.

A frequently cited expression of this vision of reality is the simile of Indra's Net from the Avatamsaka Sūtra, which was further elaborated by the Huayen teachers. The whole universe is seen as a multidimensional net, and at every point where the strands of the net meet jewels are set. Each jewel reflects the light reflected in the jewels around it, and each of those jewels in turn reflects the lights from all the jewels around them, and so on, forever. In this way each jewel, or each particular entity or event, including each person, ultimately reflects and expresses the radiance of the entire universe. All of totality can be seen in each of its parts.

Huayen teaching features a range of holographic samadhi instructions drawn from the Flower Ornament Sutra. These practices help clear away limited preconceptions, foster fresh perspectives on reality, and expand mental capacities by expressing our deep interconnectedness.

One example is the “lion emergence” samādhi, in which upon every single hair tip abide numerous Buddha lands containing a vast array of Buddha-s, bodhisattvas, and liberating teachings. Another model is the “ocean mirror” or
“ocean seal” samadhi. In this image, awareness is like the vast ocean surface, reflecting and confirming in detail all phenomena of the entire universe. Waves of phenomena may arise on the surface of the ocean, distorting its ability to mirror plainly. But when the waves subside as the water calms and clears, the ocean mirror again reflects all clearly. Our individual minds are like this, often disturbed by turbulence, but also capable of settling serenely to reflect clear awareness.

f. The Doctrine of the Absolute Śūnyatā

In early Buddhism, the term “suññatā” or “śūnyatā” is used primarily in connection with the “no-self” (anatman) doctrine to denote that the Five Aggregates (skandha-s) are “empty” of the permanent self or soul which is erroneously imputed to them.

Śūnyatā is frequently translated into English as emptiness. In Buddhism, emptiness is a characteristic of phenomena arising from the Buddha's observation that nothing possesses an essential, enduring identity. In the Buddha's spiritual teachings, the realization of the emptiness of phenomena (Pāli: suññatānupassanā) is an aspect of the cultivation of insight (vipassanā-bhāvanā) that leads to wisdom and inner peace. The importance of this insight is especially emphasized in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and is explicated in the Tathāgatagarbha sutras.

According to the Mahāyāna teaching of Śūnyatā, beings and things have no intrinsic existence in themselves. All phenomena come into being because of conditions created by other phenomena. Thus, they have no existence of their own
and are empty of a permanent self. There is neither reality nor not-reality; only relativity.

This Śūnyatā (emptiness) is not nihilistic. All phenomena are void of self-essence, but it is incorrect to say that phenomena exist or don’t exist. Form and appearance create the world of myriad things, but the myriad things have identity only in relation to each other. Beyond identity, Śūnyatā is an absolute reality that is all things and beings, un-manifested.

i. The Meaning of the Concept of Śūnyatā

Śūnyatā (Emptiness) is a key theme of the Heart Sutra, one of the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which is commonly chanted by Mahāyāna Buddhists worldwide.

The Heart Sutra declares that the aggregates (skandha-s) which constitute our mental and physical existence are empty in their nature or essence, i.e., empty of any such nature or essence. But it also declares that this emptiness is the same as form (which connotes fullness), i.e., that this is an emptiness which is at the same time not different from the kind of reality which we normally ascribe to events. It is not a nihilistic emptiness that undermines our world, but a positive emptiness which defines it:
“The noble bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, engaged in the depths of the practice of the perfection of wisdom, looked down from above upon the five aggregates and saw that they were empty in their essential nature.”

“Hear, O Śāriputra, emptiness is form; form is emptiness. Apart from form, emptiness is not; apart from emptiness, form is not. Emptiness is that which is form, form is that which is emptiness. Just thus are perception, cognition, mental construction, and consciousness.”

“Hear, O Śāriputra, all phenomena of existence are marked by emptiness: not arisen, not destroyed, not unclean, not clean not deficient nor fulfilled.”

For Nāgārjuna, who provided an important philosophical formulation of emptiness, emptiness as the mark of all phenomena is a natural consequence of dependent origination; he is reported to identify the two in his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. In his analysis, any enduring essential nature (i.e., fullness) would prevent the process of dependent origination, would prevent any kind of origination at all, for things would simply always have been and always continue to be.

This enables Nāgārjuna to put forth a bold argument regarding the relation of nirvana to samsara. If all phenomenal events (i.e., the events that constitute samsara) are empty, then they are empty of any compelling ability to cause

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6 See The Heart Sūtra.
suffering. For Nāgārjuna, nirvana is neither something added to samsara nor any process of taking away from it (i.e., removing the enlightened being from it). In other words, nirvana is simply samsara rightly experienced in light of a proper understanding of the emptiness of all things.

The doctrine of emptiness, however, received its fullest elaboration by Nāgārjuna, who wielded it skillfully to destroy the substantiality conceptions of the Abhidharma schools of the Theravāda. Since there cannot be anything that is not the Buddha-nature (Buddhatā), all that appears is in truth devoid of characteristics. The doctrine of emptiness is the central tenet of the Mādhyamaka School. A statement of Nāgārjuna's views in support of it may be found in his Mūla-Mādhyamakārikā.

Nāgārjuna is regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy which he had established during the 2nd-3rd Century A.D. The “Mulamadhyamaka-karika” (Fundamentals of the Middle Way) is his major work.

It was originally composed in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit as well as early Tibetan versions of the work had survived without significant damage over the ages along with the later Chinese translations. Several complete English translations of the ‘Karika’ are available in recent times.
Emptiness thus becomes a fundamental characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The teaching is subtle and its precise formulation is a matter of sophisticated debate, since the slightest misunderstanding is said to obstruct progress towards final liberation. Emptiness is never a generalized vacuity, like an empty room, but always relates to a specific entity whose emptiness is being asserted. In this way up to twenty kinds of emptiness are recognized, including the emptiness of emptiness. The necessary in-discoverability is the essence of emptiness of Mādhyamika. It is important to distinguish this emptiness from nihilism.

The Buddhist notion of emptiness is often misunderstood as nihilism. Unfortunately, 19th century Western philosophy has contributed much to this misrepresentation. However, the only thing that nihilism and the teaching of emptiness can be said to have in common is a skeptical outset. Nihilism concludes that reality is unknowable, that nothing exists, that nothing meaningful can be communicated about the world. The Buddhist notion of emptiness is just the opposite. It states that the ultimate reality is knowable, there is a clear-cut ontological basis for phenomena and we can communicate and derive useful knowledge from it about the world. Emptiness (śūnyatā) must not be confused with nothingness. Emptiness is not non-existence and it is not non-reality.

Śūnyatā (Emptiness): The Mahāyāna tradition has put a special emphasis on śūnyatā. This was necessary, in part, because of the tendency among certain
early Buddhist schools to assert that there were aspects of reality that were not śūnya, but which had inherent in them their "own-being". Several important Buddhist philosophers dismantled these theories by arguing for the pervasiveness of śūnyatā in every aspect of reality (Nāgārjuna was among the most important of these). The specific arguments are too complicated for us to deal with here. But it is important to appreciate that understanding absolutely everything as śūnyatā could imply that even those things most revered by Buddhists (such as the Arhant ideal and the rules laid down in the Vinaya) were empty. Mahāyānists tended to argue that members of the Hīnayāna traditions were attached to their ideal forms as if they were not śūnyatā.

To some extent, śūnyatā is an extension of the concepts made explicit in The Three Flaws. All things being impermanent, nothing can be seen as having an independent, lasting form of existence. But Mahāyāna philosophers like Nāgārjuna concluded that śūnyatā is the fundamental characteristic of reality. One of the images used to illustrate the nature of reality as understood in Mahāyāna is The Jewel Net of Indra. According to this image, all reality is to be understood on analogy with Indra's Net. This net consists entirely of jewels. Each jewel reflects all of the other jewels, and the existence of each jewel is wholly dependent on its reflection in all of the other jewels. As such, all parts of reality are interdependent with each other, but even the most basic parts of existence have no independent existence themselves. As such, to the degree that reality takes form and appears to us, it is because the whole arises in an interdependent matrix of parts to whole and
of subject to object. But in the end, there is nothing (literally no-thing) there to grasp.

Pratītya-samutpāda (Dependent co-arising). The flip side of śūnyata is Pratitya-samutpada. They are two sides of the same coin. They mean the same thing, but from two different perspectives. To the extent that śūnyata is a negative concept (i.e., not svabhava), Pratitya-samutpada is the positive counterpart. Pratītya-samutpāda is an attempt to conceptualize the nature of the world as it appears to us, not (as with śūnyatā) by saying what the world is not, but by characterizing what is. I would say that Pratītya-samutpāda is probably just about my favorite religious-philosophical concept from within the traditions of the world. It is wonderfully subtle, and Buddhist philosophers have developed it beautifully.

As mentioned above, this concept is understood in two quite different ways in Theravāda and Mahāyāna thought. In Theravāda dependent co-arising (usually designated by its form in Pāli, Paticca-samuppada) is understood as a logical-causal chain which illustrates in a linear fashion the preconditions of suffering that can be analyzed and eliminated according to a strictly codified pattern of behavior. In Mahāyāna, on the other hand, which emphasizes the emptiness of things, dependent co-arising as a concept is used to clarify the nature of śūnyata by showing that all things that appear to have independent, permanent existence are really the product of many forces interacting. Thus, in Mahāyāna it is stressed that
all things are dependently co-arisen, because their seemingly independent existence really depends on the coming together simultaneously (the co-arising) of the various parts and forces that go into making them up. As such, Pratitya-samutpada is more a metaphysical concept in Mahāyāna, and it is nonlinear inasmuch as it attempts to picture a universe in which all things are inextricably linked in a cosmic wholeness that cannot be unwoven into independent threads or pieces.

Mahāyāna thinkers have asserted that all phenomena, including especially individual human beings, are like this, inasmuch as it is impossible to locate any basic particle or entity that is dependent in no way for its definition and existence on the relationship that it has to other things. All things are, therefore, “empty” and “dependently co-arisen”.

Many great Buddhist philosophers have thought through with great care the nature of śūnyatā and Pratītya-samutpāda. This is but a simple illustration of much more complex reasoning, such as that found in the writings of Nāgārjuna, Chandrakirti, and other subtle thinkers.

It may seem that the articulation of such ideas “tends not to edification” or that it resembles absurd philosophical speculation such as "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" However, the study of these (and other) philosophical

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concepts has typically been linked with practices that train Buddhists to release themselves from attachment to or striving after "things" that might seem to offer some lasting sort of satisfaction. One of the most basic forms of attachment is the mind's tendency to grasp after objects of thought and perception as real (i.e., as having svabhava), and this tendency is reinforced in ideas that we have about the world. The use of philosophical reasoning to deconstruct such misconceptions (as they are understood within Buddhism) is a powerful vehicle for eliminating seeds that can eventually grow into very serious obstacles in one's orientation to the world.

Among the most important applications of these ideas with Mahāyāna has been to expose the emptiness and the co-dependently arisen qualities of even Buddhism itself. Mahayana claims itself to be an important vehicle to liberation, but it also points to its own provisional character. Mahāyāna does not see itself as an end, but as means to an end. That end is liberation, enlightenment, and an end to suffering. However, as with all religions, there is a tendency for the religion to reinforce itself as real, as an end in itself, within the minds of its adherents. The philosophical traditions of emptiness and dependent co-origination are important correctives to this tendency. There is an important saying within Zen: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” When people come to see the Buddha as a being to be revered merely for the sake of piety itself, or when Buddhism itself becomes the chief focus of its practitioners, then it is time to “kill the Buddha”, to point to the emptiness and provisional quality of Buddhism itself.
ii. The Concept of Emptiness in Relation with Dependent Origination

Dependent Origination demonstrates the interconnectedness of all phenomenons, their impermanence, their lack of an intrinsic self, and factors of conditioning. Likewise, emptiness for Nāgārjuna is equivalent to Dependent Origination as stated by Candrakīrti, “The meaning of the expression ‘Dependent Origination’ is the same as “emptiness”, but it entails a further emphasis on the lack of intrinsic nature of dhamma-s and states that all dhamma-s are conceptual constructs. To the Abhidhamma, dhamma-s are the smallest analyzable unit of existence, but for Nāgārjuna, even these dhamma-s are conceptual constructs, and understanding this is having proper wisdom (prañja): the understanding of emptiness.

Dependent Origination is the main ontological principle in early Buddhism and Abhidhamma Buddhism, but in Nagrajuna’s system emptiness becomes the term to represent this chief ontological principle. He writes, “It is Dependent Origination that we call emptiness”. Dependent arising and emptiness describe how reality comes to be; as such, it is ultimate truth and an ontological truth. This emphasis of emptiness as an ultimate truth is a later development unique to Nāgārjuna and later Buddhist thought. Nāgārjuna emphasizes the lack of intrinsic existence in the conventional level of reality. This lack must be apprehended by understanding the ultimate truth of emptiness.
These two levels of reality mutually imply each other. Emptiness becomes dhammatta, the true nature of things. A commentator to Nāgārjuna describes emptiness as, “non conditioned by others, quiescent, accessible to saints only by direct intuition, beyond all verbal differentiations, still, it is nothing more than the mere absence of inherently or intrinsically real existence.” As a principle śūnyatā states that everything that one encounters in life is empty of a permanent soul or inherent nature and is inter-related, never self-sufficient, or independent; thus nothing has independent reality.

Although there are different ways to explain the theory of emptiness, all are based on the theory of Dependent Origination. Nāgārjuna provides an insightful formulation of śūnyatā as the mark of all phenomena, as a natural consequence of Dependent Origination and an elaboration upon dependent arising. A further elaboration upon Dependent Origination is that the concept of emptiness is not itself a true doctrine or view, but is a therapeutic device. Nāgārjuna had explained this as the “antidote to all viewpoints”.

Emptiness is a key concept in Buddhist philosophy, or more precisely, in the ontology of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The phrase form is emptiness; emptiness is form is perhaps the most celebrated paradox associated with Buddhist philosophy. It is the supreme mantra. The expression originates from the Prajñāparamitahridaya Sutra, commonly known as the Heart Sutra, which contains
the philosophical essence of about six hundred scrolls making up the Mahāprajñāparamita. The Heart Sutra is the shortest text in this collection.

Nāgārjuna’s unique version of emptiness is a direct result of the eight-fold method of negation. It is interpreted as non-arising, non-ceasing, non-permanence, non-annihilation, non-identity, non-difference, non-coming, and non-exiting. Through the eight-fold negation, all the concepts by which we normally apprehend the world are placed in the negative form. In this way, one is supposed to realize correct understanding of “emptiness”. By understanding the “emptiness” of these concepts by which we conceptually construct and apprehend the world and even the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, one can understand the emptiness of emptiness. This is an innovation in Buddhist thought attributed to Nāgārjuna.\(^8\)

The Huayen school uses the analogy of a golden lion to illustrate the idea of emptiness. Fa-Tsang separates matter and emptiness, claiming that “emptiness has no character of its own... but shows itself by means of matter”. Therefore, emptiness is phenomena being dependent on causation. The Huayen school illustrates the interpenetration of all things: “Only when the one is completely the many may be called the one, and only when the many is completely the one can be called the many”. Here arises another paradox – The All is One, and the One is All. Parts are only a construction, a creation of human perception. The Universe

requires all of its parts to be the Universe, just as a building requires all of its rafters. This interdependence has its foundation in emptiness.

It is quite apparent that understanding emptiness affects our interaction with the world and all we hold dear. In understanding the universality of all things, one shifts from an ego-centric state to a state of selflessness. This is epitomized in the Bodhisattva vow to put off liberation until all beings are enlightened. What is there to desire, to suffer from or for, when you have infinity within yourself, when you are infinity? It is not through gain that we end suffering, but rather through a turning inward of the mind – a dissolution of ego illusion, our self-created prisons. All external desires, all sense gratification, can no longer compete with the infinite bliss which is realizing the Self, our true nature – emptiness.