

## VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### The “Thought of Enlightenment” in Fa-tsang’s Hua-yen Buddhism

DALE S. WRIGHT

HUA-YEN 華嚴 Buddhism, the pre-eminent philosophical form of Buddhism in early T’ang dynasty China, was instrumental in laying the conceptual foundations for virtually all subsequent East Asian Buddhism. This Hua-yen legacy includes Ch’an/Zen and Pure Land, the non-philosophical forms of Buddhism that came to dominance in the centuries to follow. In this sense, Fa-tsang 法藏 (643–712), the third patriarch and foremost philosopher of Hua-yen, can be considered one of the forefathers of East Asian Buddhism today.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on one element in Fa-tsang’s thought, this essay attempts to articulate the overall character of Hua-yen thought and, in the process, to shed light on its connection to other dimensions of the Buddhist tradition.

In Fa-tsang’s monumental *Wu-chiao chang* 五教章 (*Treatise on the Five Teachings*),<sup>2</sup> the mental image of a house is taken to model the *dharmakāya* universe as a whole. On Fa-tsang’s account, since any one part of the house—his example is a rafter—is a condition for the house as a whole, that one part through its complex relations encompasses the whole house and is

<sup>1</sup> Fa-tsang, although the third patriarch in the Hua-yen lineage, was the first philosopher focused on the *Hua-yen Sutra* to bring that text to prominence in China. He served as National Teacher under Empress Wu, a position from which his fame and influence spread.

<sup>2</sup> *Wu-chiao chang* (T 45, no.1866) is Fa-tsang’s effort to survey the vast collection of Buddhist texts and ideas in order to place them into an understandable order. His “classification of the teachings” (*p’an-chiao* 判教) shows extraordinary sophistication and wide-ranging knowledge of the history of Buddhism, and attempts to demonstrate at that time which parts of this overwhelming tradition were most worthy of study and meditation.

therefore able to reveal it comprehensively. What he calls the “one flavor” of the *dharmakāya* can be fully tasted in any one part. Adopting Fa-tsang’s systematic principle and taking the concept of *bodhicitta* as the focal point of the study, this essay attempts to show the “one flavor” of Fa-tsang’s Buddhist thought through the treatment he gives to the traditional idea of the “thought of enlightenment.”

The concept *bodhicitta* comes up frequently in Fa-tsang’s voluminous writings. That, however, would not make it exceptional since, like Vasubandhu, his Indian Buddhist model, Fa-tsang works with the full historical repertoire of Buddhist concepts. And although *bodhicitta* warrants an entire text named in its honor—*The Hua-yen Bodhicitta Treatise*<sup>3</sup>—one would still be overstating the case to claim that this is a central concept for Fa-tsang. Nevertheless, as promised by Fa-tsang, no matter which part, even down to a speck of dust in the entire universe, the character of the whole can be seen clearly in this *bodhicitta* component. Here’s how.

There is no question but that the most important claim that Fa-tsang makes about *bodhicitta* is that in the moment when the first thought or aspiration to *bodhi* arises, complete and perfect enlightenment has already been attained. For example, Fa-tsang writes: “In practicing the virtues, when one is perfected, all are perfected . . . and when one first arouses the ‘thought of enlightenment’ one also becomes perfectly enlightened.”<sup>4</sup> This claim is unusual, of course, and counterintuitive because it overturns our expectations about all attainments of excellence—that they come after long and hard work, certainly not in the first serious thought or aspiration. So, on what basis has Fa-tsang made this claim about *bodhicitta*, and what does it mean?

Perhaps the best way to understand Fa-tsang’s point here is to resort back to his conceptual model of the house mentioned above. *Bodhicitta* would, in this analysis, belong to the entire quest for enlightenment as one of its many essential parts. The relevant claim for Fa-tsang is that all parts are identical in that they are all both *empty* (that is, dependent on something else) and serve as conditions for the whole being what it is. A rafter, Fa-tsang tells us, is like any part of the house in that, 1) it becomes a rafter only in relation to other parts and to the house as a whole and 2) that, without it, the house could not be what it is. This fact entails several further claims relevant to our concern for *bodhicitta*: that, as an essential condition for the house, the rafter

<sup>3</sup> *Hua-yen fa p’u-t’i hsin chang* 華嚴發菩提心章, T 45, no.1878.

<sup>4</sup> *Wu-chiao chang*, T 45, 507c.

possesses the power to create the entire house, and that therefore it stands in a relation of identity to the house as a whole.

Rather than examine Fa-tsang's logic on these points, let us consider their extension to the concept of *bodhicitta*. The "thought of enlightenment" is indeed a condition of possibility for the enlightenment quest. Without this initial step, without an idea of what one is after and an earnest intention to seek it, there clearly would be no such outcome. But in what sense would the reverse be true? How would the first "thought of enlightenment" depend on the eventual outcome? How can something occurring now depend on something not yet in existence? The answer is that the former can depend on the latter only *when* the latter has come into being. *When* it has come into being, then both depend on each other to be exactly what they are in the specific sense that they are defined in relation to each other.

The temporal element in this sentence, indicated by the word "when," is the key to Fa-tsang's understanding of *bodhicitta*. Notice that the model of the house, and virtually all of Fa-tsang's conceptual models, are static in structure, that is, time is not a component or a variable in the model. Fa-tsang has us examine the house and its components from the perspective of its completion, not in the stages of its construction. This is an important factor in understanding Hua-yen metaphysics. Fa-tsang responds to every narrative sequence such as the stages leading up to enlightenment by asking how it would appear from the perspective of the end of time. A piece of lumber becomes a rafter only when it is a part of a completed house; the part is made a part by the completed whole. Analogously, enlightenment is fully present in the initial "thought of enlightenment," but only from the perspective of the completion of the journey.

The understanding of temporality that sets the stage for Fa-tsang's *bodhicitta* doctrine is based on his understanding of the "emptiness of time," to which we now turn. Fa-tsang lays the dimensions of time out in the same way that he does the parts of a house. Like the parts of any whole, a segment of time, for Fa-tsang, depends on all others, shapes all others, and, through their complex interpenetration, contains the whole of time within it. Therefore, he writes: "Because an instant has no essence, it penetrates the eternal, and because the lengthy epochs have no essence, they are fully contained in a single instant . . . Therefore, in an instant of thought all elements of the three periods of time—past, present, and future—are fully revealed."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Hua-yen ching i-hai pai men* 華嚴經義海百門, T 45, 630c.

Taking the perspective of the end of time, Fa-tsang can operate the principle of dependent arising both forwards and backwards in time. Not only is the end dependent on the beginning but the beginning is dependent upon the end; both mutually define and contain each other. It is not just that the outcome of enlightenment depends on an initial “thought of enlightenment,” but also that the first moment of *bodhicitta* depends on the completion of the quest. Therefore, because perfect enlightenment is a cause or condition for the initial “thought of enlightenment,” that cause or condition is contained within it.

One reason why the logic of these arguments is frustrating is that Fa-tsang does not distinguish between the various senses of dependency. Wherever dependence, or any form of relation is present, Fa-tsang evokes all the linguistic and logical traditions of “*śūnyatā*” and moves the argument forward from there. We can see the insightfulness in recognizing that something earlier really does depend on something later: for example, the meaning of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand is overwhelmingly determined by the fact that it led to a world war, just as the answer to “who was the Buddha?” is determined less by what happened in Northeast India in the 5th century BCE than by what happened all over Asia in the centuries to follow. But it seems crucial to us to recognize that the nature of this dependence is fundamentally different from the dependence of linear causation. The foundation of the house is a condition for the rafter in a sense that the rafter is not a condition for the foundation. Whereas you cannot have a rafter without a foundation to hold it up, you can have a foundation without a rafter, as in the case of a house that is framed but not yet roofed, or a house that never gets finished, or a house whose carpenter decides on a rafterless roof. Moreover, the hammer, the carpenter, and the farm that grows food for the carpenter are all conditions for the rafter, but each in different senses. So to declare them identical by virtue of their mutual dependence depends on two related moves: first, on conflating the various senses of dependency, and second, on understanding all components and all possible conditions as simultaneously present, that is, taking the perspective of final completion or the end of time.

So whereas in its traditional meaning *bodhicitta* entails a Buddhist theory of *mārga* and the complexities of the path, Fa-tsang takes little interest in that meaning. The “thought of enlightenment” instead symbolizes, in the trope of irony, the sudden total presence of the completion of enlightenment even though in its initial point of departure. Precisely because the earlier tradition had conceived of *bodhicitta* as the true beginning of the path to enlightenment, Fa-tsang is able to use that concept to make a startling, counterintuitive

claim about the presence of enlightenment within, thereby directing our attention away from a linear stage theory toward a new understanding of what *bodhi* is.

One way to imagine the history of Buddhist thought up to and through the career of Fa-tsang is to consider it as a constant, impressive unfolding and enlargement of the concept of enlightenment. With every passing century, "enlightenment" in its various linguistic forms received a substantial upgrade, new dimensions and further refinement being added to the ideal over time. It is as though this history were an application of something like Anselm's ontological argument to the concept of enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> Recall that Anselm's rule for thinking the concept of divinity defines God as "that than which no greater could be thought." Applied to the history of Buddhist enlightenment and the historical unfolding of ever new dimensions to that ideal, "enlightenment" seems to have functioned as that transcendent mode of being "than which no greater could be thought." Any new Buddhist who, standing on the shoulders of his or her predecessors, could conceive of something greater in a cogent and persuasive way, extends and transforms the ideal; enlightenment is extended beyond its previous articulations, regardless of the inventor's effort to attribute their innovation to a prior sutra or text. Although it takes a long time for cultures to notice this development as a process, from our historical point of view, this is what cultural ideals are: they are the most compelling image or conception that can be imagined at any given point in time, and are therefore continually pushed along by historical impermanence.

In India this development took an unusual form, or an unusually creative and exalted form, owing to the indigenous concept of rebirth. Idealizations in India did not need to conform to enlargements of human capacity imaginable in a person's current lifetime. Indeed they could be projected far ahead of the present life by thousands or tens of thousands of evolutionary lives. While, from a Chinese point of view, this elevation of temporal perspective had a negative effect on the practical applicability of Indian ideals, it did serve as a catalyst for their imaginative character, and for the extension of metaphysical and ethical thinking into previously unencountered realms of reflection.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Anselm (1033–1109) was the Archbishop of Canterbury in England and one of the greatest theologians in Christian history. In a text called the *Proslogion*, he developed what came to be called the ontological argument for the existence of God. This argument, which has been more influential in Christian theology as a rule for thinking the concept God than it has been as a proof, defines God as "that than which no greater can be thought."

This is certainly no place to attempt to trace the history of this development, but just imagine for a moment the movement of the concept of nirvana from a state of an individual's curtailed emotional suffering due to the conquest of desires and the emptying of self-interest, to a state pictured, for example, in the *Gandhavyūha* portion of the *Hua-yen Sutra*, where the ideal now includes grand visions of enormously complex and interpenetrating realms, other world systems imagined in vivid depth and detail, compassionate concern for all sentient beings, even to the point of vowing to lead these virtually innumerable beings into this enlightened state of exaltation. And this transformation in goal in just over a half a millennium of Buddhist history!

When in the seventh century Fa-tsang was in a position to survey this magnificent ideal of enlightenment, the distance that must have been felt between any existing practitioner, no matter how advanced in Buddhist practice, and the way the goal was then conceptualized, must have been overwhelming. Fa-tsang, therefore, faced a daunting challenge as a Buddhist philosopher, especially in the highly creative atmosphere of the early T'ang. In order to gather the Buddhist tradition together into its most exalted form, he had to ask himself what Anselm asked: what is the conception than which no greater could be thought? Here is Fa-tsang's answer in a nutshell: "enlightenment" includes all of the above, that is, every admirable attribute, no matter how transcendent, that had accumulated in the Buddhist tradition up to that point, AND all of this is realizable right now, in this moment of this life, not thousands of lifetimes from now. Here is where we can see most clearly Fa-tsang's motive for handling the *bodhicitta* teaching as he did. The serious thought of and aspiration for enlightenment is not simply a first step on an arduous path whose terminus you should not expect to glimpse for eons. Instead, Fa-tsang's *bodhicitta* is a moment of liberating insight in which the end, and all the future leading up to it, is fully revealed.

Of the many Buddhist ideas that Fa-tsang drew up into his new system of Buddhist thought, three are especially germane to understanding how *bodhicitta* comes to receive the treatment that it does. First, Fa-tsang is well known for the eagerness with which he received the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha*, the Indian and central Asian concept of the "womb of the Buddha," or the embryo of enlightenment resident within all sentient beings. Although *tathāgatagarbha* might be thought not to fit convincingly with Fa-tsang's focus on *śūnyatā*, he nevertheless finds in this conception a perfect image to assist in bringing enlightenment nearer to the practitioner. Different texts, of course, stake out different conceptions of this teaching, based on different

metaphors and different visual images. They cover a range from an image of enlightenment as an innate seed which would, if properly cultivated, eventuate in a fully mature awakened bodhisattva, to an image of enlightenment not in the form of potential but rather in a state of full accomplishment.

Positioned as he was in Chinese Buddhist history, Fa-tsang leans toward the latter of these images, where enlightenment is the diamond discovered when the dust that obscures it is wiped away; it is eternally the same, does not need to grow and mature, and is radiantly present the moment even a section of it comes to light. At this point it is easy to see why Fa-tsang's *p'an-chiao* classification scheme places the doctrine and texts of *tathāgatagarbha* on top of those articulating other Mahayana themes like *śūnyatā* and *viññaptimātratā*: assuming, as Fa-tsang did, the applicability of emptiness to all things and the primary role of consciousness in the construction of human experience, he is simply more interested at that historical moment in how it is that all these exalted realizations can be expected to come to fruition in the life of a human being. They do so, he came to conclude, because they constitute the innate structure of the *tathāgata* within, and come to fruition in the natural unfolding of this depth structure.

This is also why Fa-tsang takes an interest in the early Buddhist idea of "irreversibility," the idea that at some point along the path the journey's completion is assured. Characteristically, Fa-tsang placed this moment shockingly early in the process, earlier than Abhidharma masters might have thought useful for the purposes of incentive to practice. For Fa-tsang, *bodhicitta* is the moment when the *tathāgatagarbha* shows itself, the moment when the diamond first comes to light and from which point on there is certainty of irreversible destiny.<sup>7</sup> *Bodhicitta* therefore arises dependent on nothing but the inner inevitable motion of the Buddha within all things.

The second of the three factors that would have helped Fa-tsang shape the concept of *bodhicitta* as he did was the increasingly prevalent tendency in Chinese Buddhism to redescribe the enlightenment experience as sudden breakthrough. Since the sudden/gradual debate and its later development in the Ch'an school are so well known, I will not dwell on it here except to show how Fa-tsang weighs in on the issue and how it affects his placement of the "thought of enlightenment." Suffice it to say that although Fa-tsang's doctrine of sudden awakening is not and could not be as well developed conceptually and practically as it came to be several generations later with the

<sup>7</sup> *Wu-chiao chang*, T 45, 489b.

Hua-yen masters Tsung-mi 宗密 (780–841) and Li T'ung-hsuan 李通玄 (635 [646]–730 [740]), or with the emergence in the eighth century of the Ch'an school, it is nevertheless essential to the way Fa-tsang conceives the character of enlightenment. Words denoting an abrupt and sudden experiential transformation can be found throughout Fa-tsang's treatises. And, beyond his Chinese predecessors, there was ample precedent in the Indian and Central Asian Buddhist tradition for the expectation of sudden revelation. No doubt foremost among Fa-tsang's inspirations would have been segments in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the final *Gandavyūha* chapter in particular, where sudden insight typified the experience of the bodhisattva Sudhāna in his journey through increasingly profound levels of realization. In classifying and ranking all Buddhist teachings, Fa-tsang would reserve the second highest level for those articulating doctrines of sudden breakthrough.

The third and last conceptual factor that set the stage for Fa-tsang's treatment of *bodhicitta* is the dichotomy that began to develop in Fa-tsang, and came to fruition in later Hua-yen and Ch'an, between *yuan-ch'i* 緣起 or dependent arising and *hsing-ch'i* 性起 or nature arising. While Fa-tsang's historical reputation as a philosopher of dependent arising is well deserved given the ubiquity and sophistication of *pratityasamutpāda* in his writings, the ultimate trajectory of Fa-tsang's thought is away from the gradualism implied in linear dependency and toward the nonlinear abruptness of his concept of Buddha-nature. The word *hsing* or "nature" is as central and as important a concept as you can find in the history of Chinese thought from Mencius' propositions about human nature to the early and fateful translation of the Sanskrit *svabhāva* into *tzu-hsing* 自性, or "self-nature," and beyond. Fa-tsang's treatment of the concept *hsing* is merely a part in a much larger cultural whole. While Fa-tsang would continue throughout his career to teach the emptiness of self-nature, he would simultaneously elevate the overarching vision of emptiness as the "true nature" wherein *hsing* would attain identification with concepts of *tathāgata*, *dharmakāya*, and other symbols of non-empty ultimacy.

Therefore, we see in Fa-tsang an important reversal of images. Dependent arising had encouraged Buddhist practitioners in the earlier tradition to visualize Buddhahood as the end product of an extended series of linear transformations. What Fa-tsang had begun to imagine, from the nonlinear perspective of temporal interpenetration, was the explosive power within that drives this process from the outset. In this view *bodhicitta* is the "Buddha-nature" making itself known in the form of inevitability and irre-



versibility, something pushing out from within rather than something eventually coming into actuality through causation. Rather than a result of maturation, Buddhahood is its cause.

While later Hua-yen and Ch'an thinkers would set "dependent arising" and "nature-arising" in contrast to each other, Fa-tsang did not do so both because in his time the impetus to metaphysical doctrines of suddenness was not as strong as it would be later, and because his interest was in the "non-obstruction" between these two Buddhist conceptions. "Nature-arising," for Fa-tsang, could encompass "dependent arising," without obstructing it. While all individual things arise dependent on others, from a more lofty perspective, this whole process of impermanent coming to be and passing away is the arising of just one thing—Buddha-nature.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he writes: "all arisings are simply the arising of the *tathāgata*."<sup>9</sup> "There is nothing that does not arise from the *dharmakāya* and there is nothing that does not return to and become enlightened in the *dharmakāya*."<sup>10</sup>

For Fa-tsang these two apparently contradictory processes—dependent arising and nature arising—are simultaneously true, and *wu-ai* 無碍, non-obstructing, because they operate at very different levels of intelligibility and can be experienced from different points of view. "When the *dharmakāya* circulates in the five destinies," writes Fa-tsang, "it is experienced as sentient beings. When sentient beings are seen, the *dharmakāya* does not appear."<sup>11</sup> The world of dependent arising, in all its complexity, is for Fa-tsang set within another all-encompassing narrative which gives the story a moral. This narrative—nature arising, or the *tathāgatagarbha*—explains how the endless movement of complex, dependent particulars is all directed to the end of global insight. It is the story of the Buddha's own continual circulation through ignorance and enlightenment. For Fa-tsang, however, both levels of insight appear simultaneously, and their simultaneity, as we have seen, is predicated upon the extent to which he can picture himself both in time and standing outside of it. It is only on this basis that *bodhicitta* can be both an initial stage on the path to enlightenment and its complete and final accomplishment. Asserting "non-obstruction" between them, he writes: "The stages are not disturbed, yet they are mutually identified. Identity is not

<sup>8</sup> *Hua-yen ching wen-ta* 華嚴經問答, T 45, 610b.

<sup>9</sup> *Wu-chiao chang*, T 45, 497a.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting the *Mahāvānasaṃgraha*, T 31, 249.

<sup>11</sup> *Hua-yen fa p'u-t'i hsin chang*, T 45, 653b.

disturbed, yet there always remains a sequence. Therefore these two concepts are mutually inclusive and non-obstructing.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, if we ask the question of Fa-tsang: Does enlightenment arise dependent on the particularities of Buddhist practice? We get a complex answer. Yes, says Fa-tsang, from one point of view insight is based on practice, and from the moment of *bodhicitta* on the practitioner moves through a sequence of dependent stages. On the other hand, Fa-tsang and much of the East Asian tradition after him were inclined to answer the question in the negative: No, enlightenment does not arise dependent on practice since practice is simply the unfolding and outpouring of pre-existent enlightenment. Moreover, these two truths do not obstruct one another. It is not that “dependent arising” and “nature arising” constitute separate or dual realities; it is rather that one reality and one view encompasses the other. From Fa-tsang’s perspective, both the “small vehicle” view of *bodhicitta* as the beginning of a linear journey and the “great vehicle” view of *bodhicitta* as a complete experience of enlightenment are simultaneously true, the latter encompassing and upstaging the former. However, when Fa-tsang says that “there is no contradiction between simultaneity and sequence”<sup>13</sup> it is important to recognize that the point of view from which he can say that can only be higher order simultaneity, the perspective from which past, present, and future are completely present. It is the character and status of this atemporal perspective that makes Fa-tsang’s *bodhicitta* doctrine, and his thought as a whole, both spiritually powerful, and philosophically problematic.

<sup>12</sup> *Wu-chiao chang*, T 45, 490a.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 482c.