



# Huayen and the Structure of Society

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It is a truism that the human race's intellectual and technological achievements have now far outstripped its emotional and spiritual growth. As a result we are currently living in an age of great potential but equally great danger, and our existing social structures seem inadequate to cope with this crisis. Can the Buddhadharmā, and the Huayen teachings in particular, provide an alternative view of society that might help us to find a way out of our difficulties? The observations below represent one attempt at answering this question.

[Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the *Avatamsaka* (Flower Adornment) *Sutra*.]

## Devadatta

When the Buddha was approaching the end of his life, Devadatta suggested that it was time to appoint a successor as head of the Buddhist monastic community, but the Buddha refused to do so. He pointed out that the community of monks and nuns already had his teaching (the Dharma) and the rules of conduct (the Vinaya) to guide them. There was no need, he said, to set up an organization and put somebody in charge of it in order to ensure that the teaching continued to be studied and practiced and that the rules were observed; the community was now quite capable of regulating itself.

Although at various times and places there have been attempts in certain Buddhist countries to establish a nation-wide organization with some revered figure at its head, Buddhism has by and large remained faithful to the Buddha's injunction. As a result, the Dharma has never been imposed on unbelievers by armies roused to pious fervour, or systematically propagated by missionaries trained and dispatched by some central authority. Instead it has spread quietly, chaotically, as water does, seeping across national boundaries and into the hearts of people through the efforts of individual practitioners, monastic or otherwise, who have come to understand the Buddhadharmā for themselves and been moved to communicate their good fortune to others.

The Buddha was well aware of the dangers of social organizations based on a hierarchy of control. His own people, the Shakyas, like a number of their neighbours, practiced a kind of republicanism in which authority was vested in an elected council of elders, and social order was achieved through consultation rather than compulsion. But elsewhere the fashion for absolute monarchies sustained by the spiritual authority of the brahmin priesthood was growing, and these kingdoms were expanding their territories as their wealth and military power continued to increase.

As a spiritual teacher with a universal message, the Buddha did not discriminate between one individual and another, and he was as willing to teach kings as to instruct beggars and outcasts. Indeed, a number of kings received teachings from him and treated him with great respect. But in the early Buddhist scriptures, such as those of the Pali Canon, kings as a class are most often mentioned in connection with impermanence, because of the constant threat to life and property that they represented, and with physical suffering, because of the number and inventiveness of the tortures that they devised for those who displeased them.

Buddhism is above all concerned with the nature, causes and cure of suffering. Suffering, the Buddha taught, is the result of karma, and karma in turn springs from our own confused desires and fears. Perhaps then we should also look a little more deeply into the Buddha's refusal to set up a centralized hierarchy within his community, for suffering is a social as well as an individual phenomenon. What after all are the underlying causes for the greed, cruelty and violence that characterize so much of human history and are still raging unchecked in the world today? Can they simply be identified with the foolish conduct of individuals or are they embedded in the actual structure of society? How are Buddhists to understand the manifestation of suffering at this collective level, and what do the Huayen teachings have to say about the problem?

## Adorning the world

According to Mahayana Buddhist teachings, the inner self and the external world are interdependent manifestations of a single nondual reality. That is, the nature of the world as it appears to us is determined by our concepts, habits, feelings and modes of perception, while at the same time we define ourselves in terms of the world of temporal and spatial relationships in which we appear to be located. The enlightened awareness at the heart of our existence tells us that the dualistic picture of reality we have created is unstable and ultimately unreal, but instead of acknowledging this and abandoning our delusions, we are more likely to react to our subconscious awareness of the truth by becoming fearful and clinging all the more tightly to both self (*atmagraha*) and world (*dharmagraha*). The result of this clinging is suffering (*duhkha*) which we experience individually but also project onto the world around us. The bodhisattva therefore is committed to relieving suffering as it manifests at the social level no less than that which individuals create in their own personal lives.

For Huayen too bodhisattvas must cultivate an "Aspiration to Enlightenment that embraces the entire universe... in order to benefit countless sentient beings". Like the night goddess Vasanti they "use all sorts of means to rescue beings" who are "in danger or difficulty at sea or on land or in mountain or forest wildernesses, who have encountered robbers or brigands, or who lack food or material goods ... and are unable to save themselves". So in Sudhana's culminating vision he realizes his oneness with Samantabhadra and sees "himself in Samantabhadra's body teaching beings in every world throughout the universe".

But one meaning of 'Huayen' is 'display' or 'adornment', and according to the *Avatamsaka Sutra* the world that for ignorant beings is so full of suffering is in reality a display of the Enlightenment of the Buddha Vairocana. So the Sutra claims repeatedly that "All the buddhas can be seen/ In every single atom", and as the king Mahaprabha says to Sudhana, with regard to the jewelled city over which he reigns:

Young man, if the minds of beings are pure, if they have planted roots of goodness and made offerings to the buddhas, if they have awakened the Aspiration and set out on the path to Omniscience, making that their ultimate goal, and if they have taken up the cultivation of the practices of a bodhisattva, as I did long ago – then they will see this city as pure and adorned with jewels, but others will see only rubbish.

Samantabhadra practitioners, by relieving suffering and working to minimize the causes of suffering, are thus also attempting to transform the world, to bring it into a closer resemblance to its real, underlying nature as a display of enlightened awareness. In Mahayana terminology this is called 'adorning the world' or 'adorning the realm', and the Sutra says that bodhisattvas should "adorn the world as an offering to the Buddha". In other words, they should seek to make the world more beautiful and authentic by allowing the light of the Dharmakaya to shine through and transfigure it.



## The sickness of society

Nevertheless the world as we experience it today is far from beautiful. On the contrary, it often seems that everywhere we turn we see ugliness in the form of war, poverty, oppression, injustice, brutality and destruction of the natural environment. Clearly we are living in a sick society, and as Buddhists we should feel obliged to seek out the causes of these problems, for all the Buddhist teachings, including those of Huayen, derive ultimately from the Buddha's liberating insight into the cycle of cause and effect.

The Buddha is the Great Physician who examines the symptoms of social and psychological illness, diagnoses their causes and prescribes the treatment that will cure them. What, then, are the underlying causes of our suffering? According to the formula of the Four Holy Truths, the primary cause is craving or desire:

Then again, monks, desire is the cause, desire is the reason ... that kings fight with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmins with brahmins, householders with householders, mothers with sons, sons with mothers, fathers with sons, sons with fathers, brothers with brothers, brothers with sisters, sisters with brothers, and friends with friends. Then they fall to arguing, disputing and contending, and attack one another with their hands, with stones, with sticks or with knives; and so they suffer death or suffering equivalent to death. (*Majjhima Nikaya* 13)

As this passage shows, desire (*trishna*) or greed (*lobha*) at the social level leads inevitably to its opposite, hostility or hatred (*dvesha*). Since these two fundamental emotions are based on a false perception of reality (*viparyasa*), they cannot exist apart from delusion (*moha*) or ignorance (*avidya*), which is often spoken of as their common source. These three, greed, hatred and delusion, are collectively called the three roots of ill (*akushala-mula*) or, in Chinese, the three poisons. The ways in which they affect the psyche of the individual are analyzed in minute detail in the books of traditional Buddhist psychology, the Abhidharma, but very little is said about their manifestation at the collective level, in the structures of human society.

## Ego-based structures

Social organizations are generally conceived of as being similar to the individual self. That is, they are felt to be real entities with a controlling centre and clearly defined boundaries that mark the difference between self and not-self, or at the collective level, "us" and "the others". As with the individual self, however, such organizations are merely provisional constructs that are ultimately unreal, and our attempts to invest them with reality and defend them against imaginary internal and external threats can lead to a constant sense of insecurity and, once again, to the strengthening of the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. This process can often be seen at work even in relatively small organizations, but when our socio-political structures reach the size of national governments with their armies and police forces, or multinational corporations with vast financial resources at their disposal, the effect of the three poisons is enormously magnified, and the scale of the damage and suffering inflicted on the world increases proportionately. This is the reason for all the stories of wars, massacres, enslavement and heartless exploitation that make up so much of our history.

In the case of the individual, as was suggested above, the Buddhadharma provides us with antidotes to the poison of the defilements (*klesha*) in our own hearts, and explains how, by putting the Buddhist teachings into practice to the best of our ability, we can gradually purify our conduct and recover our spiritual health. But what of society as a whole? If large organizations or entire nations are sick, must they wait till every one of their members is healthy before they cease to function so destructively? Societies consist entirely of individuals, but individuals are also defined and powerfully influenced by the social environment in which they live, so should not the Dharma be put into practice on the individual and the social level simultaneously?



## Karmic Traces

According to Buddhist theory, our good and bad deeds leave karmic traces (*vasana*) in our consciousness, and these traces predispose us to act in a similar way in future. In other words, we develop characteristic patterns of behaviour which quickly harden into habits. These habits then become part of the image that we identify as our “self” and increasingly limit our options, making it difficult to change our habitual conduct in any fundamental way. This is why overcoming the influence of the three poisons is so very difficult and why Enlightenment, though always so close to us, is so rarely realized: our bad habits of body, speech and mind have become so deeply entrenched over innumerable lifetimes that it is now almost impossible for us to behave in accordance with our true nature or to see things as they really are.

The same process can be seen at work in social groups. Societies also develop habits based on the false ideology of the ego, and these find expression in institutionalized patterns of behaviour that perpetuate the cycles of greed, hatred and delusion. The behavioural patterns and the institutions that embody them then become accepted as something natural and inevitable, and the lives and expectations of all the individuals whose karmic traces gave rise to the social structures in the first place are henceforth moulded and restricted by the pervasive power of their own creation.

How are these karmic habits to be overcome? In the case of the individual, as we have seen, Buddhist tradition has a wealth of methods and techniques to offer, but when it comes to dealing with negative forces at the social level the texts are largely silent. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. For most of its history Buddhism has been an essentially peaceful religion dependent for its prosperity and its very existence on the good will, or at least the indifference, of capricious and often despotic rulers. To keep the favour of these rulers, therefore, Buddhist leaders had to assure them that Buddhism would strengthen social stability and bring supernatural blessings – always provided, of course, that the ruler gave his (seldom her) support to the Dharma. To inform kings and emperors that all their wealth and power were the product of ignorance, greed and hatred would only have been to invite persecution and limit the ability of Buddhism to counter these same poisons by promoting wisdom, contentment and compassion within the society.

Today however we live in quite a different world, and in countries where democratic and pluralistic values prevail religious organizations have become largely autonomous, neither under the control of the national government nor exerting any direct influence on it. This means that those of us who are fortunate enough to live under such circumstances are now free to examine the structures of our society critically in the light of the Dharma, in order that we might discover a way to reduce the amount of suffering in the world that is attributable to political and economic causes – suffering that in many areas is increasing rather than diminishing, in spite of all the knowledge and technological resources at our disposal.

But if Buddhism in general lacks a sophisticated tradition of social and political criticism, where is it to find the conceptual tools that will enable it to make sense of the ever-increasing complexity of society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Here perhaps the Huayen teachings could have a useful role to play. Modern scholars have often noted, for example, the affinity of Huayen with certain theories and discoveries in modern physics. The Huayen emphasis on the relational aspect of reality and the interconnectedness of all phenomena also agrees well with an age in which ecological awareness is increasing and the barriers that divide individuals and nations from one another are being steadily broken down in one way or another.

## Indra's Net

According to Indian tradition Indra's Net signifies illusion, but for Mahayana Buddhism it is also a metaphor illustrating the true nature of things, which is always conditioned (*pratityasamutpada*) and therefore indeterminate or 'empty' (*shunya*) of any defining substance (*svabhava*). Huayen takes this metaphor a step further and sees in Indra's Net an image of the entire phenomenal universe as an infinite web of events in time and space, all linked together in such a way that not a single one can be changed without altering the character of the whole. In Huayen terminology this is known as the interdependent arising of the Dharmarealm or the complete and simultaneous inter-responsiveness of all phenomena.

If we apply this concept to human affairs, we can interpret society as a network of relationships in which we are all equally dependent on one another and in which no individual is intrinsically more or less important than any other. Each individual has a unique role to play, just as each event is unique, but at the same time all are equal in that each one embodies the totality of society, for the one and the many include one another, even though each one remains distinct from all the rest.

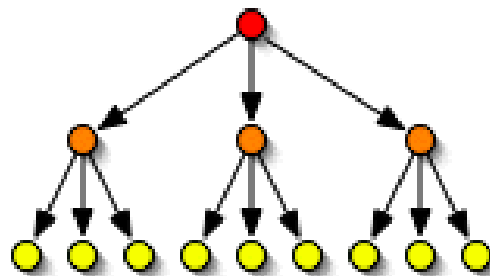
Nor does this interdependence stop at the borders of human society. The lives of human beings are also connected to the natural world in the same way, to an extent that we are beginning to understand only now, as the damage we have inflicted on our natural environment is increasingly reflected in our own damaged psyches and social relationships. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century even our survival as a species, that we have always taken for granted, is beginning to look much less certain.

To be sure, these environmental problems have always existed, and as early as the fourth century B.C.E. Mencius (6A.8) was already lamenting the deforestation of the mountains:

Mencius said: The trees on Ox Mountain used to be beautiful... But now when people see its denuded slopes they don't believe they were ever forested. Is this how a mountain should be?

But modern technology, which has been developing rapidly ever since the Industrial Revolution, has magnified the destructive power of society enormously. What then is to be done? As was pointed out above, the rigid social structures that we have become accustomed to are the result of the ego projecting its obsessive need to control and its fear of annihilation onto the sociopolitical realm. But if society were to be seen as a cooperative network rather than as a hierarchy of power, it would then be more in accord with the conditioned and relational nature of existing reality, and social structures would also be more flexible and efficient in adapting to changing circumstances.

## The Pyramid and the Web



*Pyramidal structure*

A hierarchy of power or control can be represented as a pyramid:

This is the way the egoic mind (*manas*) controls, or imagines it controls, the various activities of body, speech and mind. It is also the way in which governments and other large organizations tend to operate, with all important executive decisions being made at the top and then flowing down through the hierarchy in the form of instructions or commands. Since structures of this type are based on power, they can also produce powerful results, whether for good or ill, and conventional history books are largely a record of the achievements and disasters they have created. Nevertheless, from the Buddhist point of view such structures are also mechanisms that serve the purposes of the ego, so they will inevitably generate a great deal of suffering. Communication within them is also mostly one-way, from the upper to the lower levels, and this makes them inflexible and inefficient.

Every network is a set of relationships and consists of two parts or aspects: (1) the 'links' or 'connections', which are the relationships themselves, and (2) the 'nodes', which are the points connected by the relationships. For ordinary unenlightened beings (*prithagjana*) the nodes are the primary reality and the links are little more than an abstraction, but for the buddhas the opposite is the case: it is the network of relationships that is the actual reality, as far as conventional truth (*samvritisatya*) is concerned at any rate, and the nodes, whether they be dharmas or sentient beings, that are the abstraction.

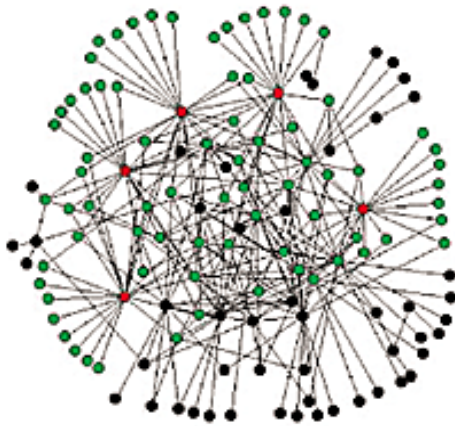
Networks can be of various kinds. The pyramidal model illustrated above does not really qualify as a network at all, because the channels of communication only flow in one direction. In the case of actual social structures of this type, however, there will always be some degree of feedback, so the rudiments of a network will already be present.

A more advanced type of structure is that of a regular network in which the nodes are connected in an orderly and systematic fashion, as in a symmetrical spider's web for example. As organizational structures, regular networks can be very effective for simple tasks or limited purposes, but they become less adequate as the situation becomes more complex. The reason for this is that, although communication flows freely between the nodes, the path to be travelled between one node and another can be very long; this slows communication down and impedes efficiency. A regular network can be made more efficient however simply by introducing random connections between a few of the nodes. This can shorten the distance between one node and any other throughout the network to a surprising degree. The result is what is called a 'small-world network', alluding to the idea that every individual in the world can be connected to any other individual by tracing a sequence of no more than six personal relationships:

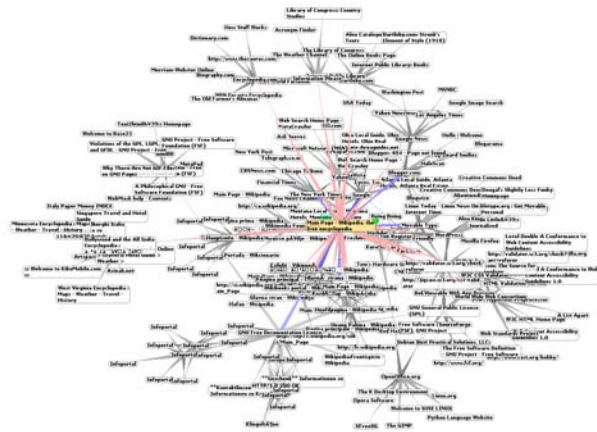


The ego fears impermanence, which it perceives as chaotic and life-threatening, so the orderly structure of pyramids and regular networks is very much to its liking. Small-world networks by contrast would seem to be more in accord with the relational and ever-changing nature of things as they really are, so from a Buddhist point of view it is only to be expected that they would function in a more efficient manner than the other two types. But there is a limit to the efficiency of small-world networks too, for after a certain number of random links have been added, no further improvement is possible and adding still more links will have no effect.

In 1998 however a new type of network was discovered by a group of physicists who were studying the structure of the internet. Somewhat to their surprise they found that the internet exhibited neither a random nor a regular structure. Instead, the nodes formed a fluid but consistent clustering pattern that remained the same regardless of the scale at which the network was examined. Because of this consistency, the investigators christened the network 'scale-free'. Scale-free networks are characterized by the clustering of links around certain nodes, called 'hubs'. In the case of the internet itself, the more popular hubs will attract thousands or even millions of links. Hubs thus come to be surrounded, as it were, by clusters of other nodes that are in direct contact with them:



*Scale-free network*



*Internet links around Wikipedia*

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Scale-free networks are not rigid or static structures. Connections between nodes are constantly shifting and changing, yet the whole network remains in a state of dynamic equilibrium. It is also very stable: unless the major hubs are subjected to deliberate attack, damage to any part of the network will have very little effect on the functioning of the whole.

Could scale-free networks serve as a model for social structures in the 21st century? The internet has no fixed centre and nobody is controlling it, yet it has become the most efficient means of communicating information that the human race has ever devised, bypassing artificial boundaries and connecting individuals directly with one another, no matter who they might be or whereabouts on the planet they may be living. Even though it has no permanent controlling centre, it functions reliably, just as the Buddhist scriptures tell us that the world of our experience functions reliably in spite of, or precisely because of, its lack of any permanent self or substance. The free and unimpeded communication between nodes on the internet is also reminiscent of the unimpeded interconnection of all phenomena in the Dharmarealm according to the Huayen teachings. Indra's Net itself is a scale-free network in that each part of it, each jewel (node), is an image of the whole, although it differs from samsaric networks in being uniform in nature and infinite in extent.

The primary task of a Samantabhadra practitioner is to seek Enlightenment,

To seek the Buddha's wisdom with all your heart,  
Gather your strength and think of nothing else.

But this task is inseparable from the commitment to enlighten other beings as well, to "enable all sentient beings to achieve boundless Enlightenment". For this reason the follower of the Ekayana is obliged to "go to all the villages, towns, cities and every place inhabited by sentient beings ... and cultivate the practices of a bodhisattva in worlds like Indra's Net", "encompassing all the realms of beings by the commitments and practices of Indra's Net".

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a web of electronic links is connecting all the people and places in the world every more closely together. At the same time however the collective ego, alarmed by these developments, is taking steps to strengthen its defenses. Thus governments persist in promoting armed conflict as they continue to build up their own stocks of deadly weapons as fast as possible, while giant corporations brush human rights and environmental concerns aside in their blind pursuit of ever greater profits. At this critical juncture in human history it may be that the Huayen vision of Indra's Net could help open people's eyes to the mutually conditioned and interdependent nature of all phenomena in the universal web of space and time. Then perhaps they might be willing to consider the possibility of replacing the ego's old social structures, which are now becoming both increasingly irrelevant and increasingly dangerous, with fluid network-based structures that would be more firmly grounded in objective reality and more in accord with the needs of a developing global society. In this way the Huayen teachings could offer guidance to human beings who are increasingly “fearful because they have lost their way” and allow the Buddha's wisdom to “shed a pure light on this polluted world” so that it might at last begin to shed its ugliness and reveal its inner adornments of peace and beauty.

