8.1 THE DHARMA TRAVELS THE SILK ROAD

Central Asia's contribution to the history of Buddhism lies largely in its role as an intermediary in the spread of the Dharma to East Asia and Tibet. However, beginning with the third century B.C.E. and lasting in some areas until the eleventh century C.E., people in the area practiced the religion for their own benefit, created Buddhist art for their own enjoyment and edification, and spread the Dharma not because it was an outside force flowing through their territory, but because it had made an important contribution to their own lives. Unfortunately, the ravages of weather and warfare have left few traces of Buddhism's former presence, but those traces attest to a vibrant and sophisticated culture.

The earliest archaeological evidence of any Buddhist activity in Central Asia consists of two Asoka inscriptions in Afghanistan. Otherwise, there is no sign of Buddhist missionary presence in Central Asia during this time, although legends in the kingdom of Khotan, located in what is now the southern portion of eastern Turkestan, claim that Asoka's son, Kusma, founded the kingdom in 240 B.C.E. and that Asoka's great grandson, Vijayasabhava, championed Buddhism there.

The earliest evidence for any Buddhist missionary activity in Central Asia dates from the Kushan empire, which we have discussed in Section 4.1. During its three centuries of rule, the Kushan empire ranked among the four major powers of the world, alongside Parthia, Rome, and China. In terms of cultural sophistication, it was the greatest empire Central Asia has ever seen. The stability it brought to the region facilitated the movement of goods and ideas along the major trade routes, including the north-south route from India into Bactria and Sogdia, and the east-west route from Persia into China, called the Silk Road after the most prized commodity that traveled west along the road.

After the fall of the Kushans in the middle of the third century, the region was fragmented politically and subject to occasional invasions by the Ephthalite Huns. The movement of ideas and goods along the Silk Road, however, increased. Originating in what is now western Iran and continuing south of the Caspian Sea, the Silk Road divided into two routes at Kashgar in the Tarim Basin, with a northern route leading through Samarkand and a southern one along the Amu River. The two routes reunited in northwest China at the city of Tun-huang, in Kansu province. Reports from Chinese travelers tell us that the city-states of Kucha, Turfan, and others along the northern route of the Silk Road belonged primarily to the Sarvastivada school, whereas Khotan was a stronghold of the Mahayana. Chinese travelers left detailed reports of the Buddhist festivals celebrated there and had high praise for the decorum and discipline of Khotanese monks. One of the few Buddhist texts undoubtedly composed in Central Asia—the Book of Zambasta—was written in Khotan. It contains an eclectic mix of Indian Buddhist myths and an idealist version of Yogacara philosophy, maintaining that all dharmas, including ignorance and wisdom, are ultimately unreal. Fragmentary murals found in Khotan depicting mandalas centered on Mahayavairocana suggest that Yoga Tantras also were practiced there.

During this period, Chinese pilgrims, convinced of the need to obtain Buddhist texts directly from India rather than through Central Asian intermediaries, began making the long, arduous journey overland to India. First among these pilgrims was the Chinese monk Fa-hsien, who reached India in 400 C.E. The last pilgrims were also the most famous: Hsuan-tsang and I-ching, who made separate journeys in the seventh century shortly before the Tibetans closed the route. This period also marks the high point in the history of the major translation center at Tun-huang. First settled by the Chinese during the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), Tun-huang had for centuries been home to a cosmopolitan population. As the Chinese demand for Buddhist texts grew, monk-scholars of many nationalities formed translation teams to meet the demand. Prominent among these teams was the group of Indians and Chinese who gathered around Dharmaraks (b. 230), a native of Tun-huang born of Yüeh-chih parents.

Tun-huang became not only a translation center but also a center of Buddhist art, known especially for its cave temples. The largest of these is the Cave of a
Thousands of Buddhas (Ch’ien-fu Tung), dating from 366 B.C.E. Today 492 caves still exist, with elaborately painted frescoes accompanied by statues ranging from barely 1 inch to 109 feet in height. More than six hundred additional caves are located in the surrounding region.

The seventh century was the beginning of a new period in Central Asian Buddhist history as Tibet suddenly rose to become the major power in the area. Originally the destroyers of the Buddhist monasteries and libraries they encountered in their conquests, the Tibetans quickly converted to the religion and became its ardent protectors. Their first contact with Buddhism was in Khotan, but in 787 they captured Tun-huang. The Tibetan king at the time, an avid Buddhist, arranged for the learned monks at Tun-huang to translate Buddhist texts into Tibetan and to answer his questions on the Dharma. Murals in the Tun-huang caves attest to the Tibetan kings’ having also sponsored Buddhist art at the center.

The Tibetan empire collapsed in the middle of the ninth century, with much of its Central Asian territory taken over by the Uighur Turks. Meanwhile, Islam had begun making mass conversions in western Central Asia in the eighth century, and by the eleventh century, had swept throughout the region. Only the Uighurs, who had converted to Buddhism from Manichaeism and had settled in Turfan, resisted Islamic influence. The Chinese recaptured Tun-huang in the eleventh century, but danger from marauding attackers forced them to seal a library in one of the caves. This was to have great consequences for the study of Buddhism in the twentieth century.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols under Genghis Khan conquered the region, destroying whatever religious culture they found. Although they eventually converted to the Tibetan form of Buddhism (see Section 11.4), the Mongols made no effort to impose their religion on their subjects. Thus Central Asia remained Muslim. The Silk Road was reopened, with the Mongol chieftains boasting that an unescorted virgin with a hoard of gold could travel from one end of the road and arrive at the other with both gold and virginity intact. India, however, was no longer exporting Buddhism, so the Dharma no longer traveled the road. After the fall of the Mongol empire, the Silk Road fell into disuse as newly opened sea routes offered a passage that was quicker and safer.

This, however, was not the end of Central Asian Buddhist history. In 1907–1908, the sealed cave at Tun-huang was discovered and reopened, yielding an invaluable treasure of 20,000 drawings and manuscripts dating from the fifth through the eleventh centuries. Among them was the world’s oldest printed book, a Chinese translation of the Diamond Sūtra dated to 868 C.E. The collection contained manuscripts in a variety of languages, both living and dead, ranging from translations, historical documents, contracts, and financial statements to songs, poems, and Sūtras. These texts have been extremely helpful for filling in gaps in Buddhist history, especially concerning the development of the early Ch’an school in China (see Section 8.5.5) and the first centuries of Tibetan Buddhism (see Section 11.2.1). More recently, manuscript fragments of Mainstream Buddhist canons dating from the first century C.E., the oldest known Buddhist manuscripts, have been found in Afghanistan. Thus, although Buddhism is no longer practiced in Central Asia, the traces of Buddhism preserved there continue to play a role in rewriting Buddhist history.

8.2 A GRAND ASSIMILATION

The Chinese encounter with Buddhism is one of the most momentous stories of intercultural assimilation in human history. Buddhism is now such an integral part of Chinese culture that it is easy to forget that Buddhism was a very foreign import when it was first brought to China, and that five centuries passed before the Chinese felt that they had a full picture of what it had to offer. Of all the Asian civilizations to which Buddhism spread outside of India, China’s was by far the most sophisticated, complex, and ethnocentric, with its own thoroughly developed system of social organization, religious ideology, and speculative thought. Nevertheless, many Chinese individuals felt that Buddhism had something new and valuable to offer in terms of devotionalism, doctrine, meditation techniques, and the vocational opportunities offered by the monastic Sangha.

The Sangha, in particular, was Buddhism’s most revolutionary contribution to Chinese society, as well as the most controversial. Chinese thought and practice had traditionally located the sacred within the realm of family, state, and social relationships, whereas the Sangha embodied the ideal of leaving not only one’s home but also one’s role within the civil society for the sake of inward cultivation. The Sangha, however, was not totally anti-family or anti-state. In India, in had become an intermediary for transferring merit to dead ancestors, and monastics had given help to royal courts, acting as advisers, diplomats, and ritual specialists. In China, members of the Sangha also took on these roles, but many court officials, offended by what they saw as the Sangha’s baleful effect on family traditions and the state economy, found these efforts at conciliation even more insidious. For centuries, they protested the Sangha’s power and occasionally succeeded in mounting purges. Nevertheless, the Sangha repeatedly revived and still exists in China, whereas the imperial courts are gone.

Many writers have stressed the extent to which the Chinese, in absorbing Buddhism into their culture, changed it and made it their own, adding elements borrowed from Confucianism, Taoism, and local spirit cults. Much of this adaptation is due to the sophistication of Chinese culture: Unlike other lands in Asia who adopted Buddhism, the Chinese did not regard it as a bringer of refined culture, for they had a strong sense that their culture was equally, if not more, refined. Thus Chinese converts to the religion had to explain it to themselves and their fellow Chinese in a way that would meet their own standards of intelligibility. Still, granted that Chinese Buddhists made changes in their religion, it is important not to underestimate their willingness for their religion to change them, as they made a sincere effort to master the practices of generosity, the Buddhist precepts, meditation, the close study of the texts, and the often strenuous demands of Buddhist devotionalism. Some Chinese Buddhists, braving many dangers, even journeyed overland or by sea to India to bring back the definitive word on the Dharma.

Many of the creative Chinese contributions to Buddhism were an effort, not to add something Chinese to Buddhism, but to work out tensions and fill in gaps
already there within Buddhism itself. For instance, the great multistyle philosophical schools of Chinese Buddhism, so distinctively Chinese, owe their existence at least in part to the disorganized way Buddhism was brought to China. Individual missionary monks would arrive from India or Central Asia, advocating a wide variety of devotional and meditational practices, and promoting a random mixture of Manicheism and Mahāyāna texts, all claiming to originate from the Buddha. At the same time, the doctrines and practices of the religion were undergoing continual changes in India, sparking new waves of missionary activity, contradicting earlier ones. This forced the Chinese to construct their own frameworks to give order to the ensuing confusion, so that they could choose the most efficacious doctrines and practices for defining and meeting their needs.

Thus the process of assimilation went both ways. Had the Chinese not been able to translate Buddhist practice into terms familiar to themselves, the religion would have remained nothing more than an exotic curiosity. Had it not offered them something useful, new, and unique, they would not have even been curious. As we survey the history of the Chinese adaptation and assimilation of Buddhism, it is useful to keep these points in mind.

### 8.3 BUDDHISM ON THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY

Chinese Buddhists preserved a story that their religion was first brought to China at the instigation of an emperor of the Later Han dynasty, Ming Ti (r. 58–75 C.E.), whose curiosity about Buddhism had been piqued by a portentous dream. Historical records, however, indicate that the religion was more likely brought into Han China by Central Asian merchants, who set up monasteries in their enclaves in the major Chinese cities and invited Central Asian monks to staff them. The first reference to Buddhism in imperial historical records, nevertheless, dates from the reign of Ming Ti. The records tell of a Chinese nobleman who combined the “gentle Buddhist rites and fasts” with Taoist practices aimed at physical immortality. The first reference to the appearance of Buddhist statues in the imperial court, dating from the second century C.E., follows a similar pattern. A Taoist adept added Buddhist rituals to a program of Taoist rites to bless the emperor. The connection between Buddhism and Taoism was justified by a story that began circulating in China during this period, claiming that the Buddha was actually the Taoist sage Tao-tzu, who had gone west at one point in his career to teach the barbarians. The Buddhists may have originally welcomed this story, for it made their religion seem less of a foreign import. Eventually, as they began asserting their own separate identity, they found the story increasingly objectionable, but not until the thirteenth century were they able to establish once and for all that it was a fabrication.

The first reference to a Buddhist monastery in China, dating from the middle of the second century C.E., also contains the first explicit description of one of the Buddhist rites practiced during these first centuries: the washing of a Buddha-image, a rite that was to enjoy long-term popularity in East Asia (see Section 8.7.3). The second century was also when the first Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese. The Parthian monk An Shih-kao reached the Chinese capital of Lo-yang in 148 and began translating a set of texts dealing with meditation practices, such as breath awareness, and numerical lists of Dharma topics, including the Wongs to Awakening. An Shih-kao was not fluent in Chinese, so a strategy was devised whereby he would recite the text to a bilingual interpreter, who would then transmit it to a group of Chinese, who would then discuss points of interpretation and produce a polished final copy. This was the procedure that similar teams of translators were to follow until the seventh century. Another translator, Lokakarma, was the first known Mahāyāna missionary. Working in Lo-yang between 168 and 188, he effected the first translation of a Perfection of Discernment text into Chinese and recruited the first Chinese monk.

The quality of the first few generations of translations was mixed, due to the inherent difficulty of translating into a sophisticated language such as Chinese, whose technical terms already packed a heavy load of connotations picked up from native philosophical traditions. Thus, for instance, in the early years the word Tao, the Way—which in Taoism meant the underlying essence of all things—was used to translate bodhi, yoga, Dharma, and mārga (path). Other inaccuracies in translation were products of simple misunderstanding. Skandha (aggregate), for instance, was rendered as yin, the passive or receptive principle of nature. Not until the early fifth century was a fairly standardized and reliable system of translation equivalents devised.

The early fifth century also marked the point when the first complete Vinaya texts were made available through the efforts of Tao-an and Kumārajiva in the north, and Fa-hsien, Gunavarman, and Saṅghavarman in the south. Prior to that time, the lack of such texts had hampered the Chinese Sangha in its organization and development.

The Later Han regime fell apart during the latter half of the second century and ended in 220, to be followed by a period in which three kingdoms vied unsuccessfully to reunite the empire. During this period, Buddhism began gaining converts among the peasants, the lower bureaucrats, and even the courts. Central Asian Buddhist monks claiming psychic abilities won many converts. Images of Buddha and bodhisattvas—especially Maitreya, Amitābha, and Avalokiteśvara—played a central role both in devotion and in meditation practice. In fact, the religion as a whole became known as the “religion of images”. The cult of the Buddha image was reportedly responsible even for some of the royal converts to Buddhism during this period. For instance, Sun Hao (r. 264–280), ruler of the kingdom of Wu, was originally anti-Buddhist. When a Buddha image was found in the park of his harem, he had it moved to his own palace where he performed his own version of the rite of washing the image, much to the amusement of his courtiers. Immediately stricken with a painful and mysterious disease, the story goes, he had to submit to the power of the Buddha and accept the Five Precepts.

The work of translation and evangelizing continued through the third century, culminating in the period when the empire was briefly reunited under the Western Chin dynasty (265–316). Dharmarakṣa (see Section 8.1), “the bodhisattva from Tun-huang,” worked in north China from 266 to 308, completing a large number of translations, including the first Chinese versions of the Lotus
Sita and the Perfection of Discernment in 23,000 Lines. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that many of his translations were less accurate than the work of translators in previous centuries. Nevertheless, he gave extensive lectures, attracted numerous converts, ordained monks, and founded monasteries. Although the sacking of the capitals at Lo-yang and Ch'ang-an at the end of the Western Chin period destroyed many of the monasteries he had founded, it caused his disciples to disperse to other parts of the country, taking his teachings along with them.

**8.4 BUDDHISM ENTERS THE MAINSTREAM OF CHINESE CULTURE**

In 318 the Western Chin dynasty fell as non-Chinese tribes living in Chinese territory conquered the northern half of the empire, driving the ruling elites south to the area of the Yangtze River. This event ushered in the period of the northern and southern dynasties (318–589), during which the southern half of the empire was ruled by a series of native dynasties, whereas the north fell under a succession of sinicized “barbarian” rulers. The political division of the empire was reflected in a cultural division. The south tended to follow more traditional modes of Chinese culture; the north was more open to outside influences.

Buddhism made enormous advances in gaining adherents in both north and south. The institution of the Sangha provided a haven for men and women from all levels of society, including those orphaned by the sporadic warfare as well as those whose general exposure to hardship inspired them with the desire for a religious vocation. The sense of dislocation suffered by the elites at this time resembled that felt in India at the time of the Buddha. Many began questioning their cultural ideology and found that Buddhism had satisfactory answers for their questions. As a result, Buddhism was increasingly accepted into mainstream Chinese culture and began to have a major influence on the life and values of society as a whole.

The period was notable for two major developments. One was the institution of a Buddhist nuns’ order. In 317, Chu Ching-chien (circa 292–361) was the first Chinese woman to take the novice’s precepts. When joined by 24 other like-minded women, she founded a convent in Ch'ang-an. Soon other convents were founded in both north and south China. Not until 434, however, was the Bhikṣuṇī Sangha established on Chinese soil, when a group of Sri Lankan bhikṣuṇīs came specifically for that purpose. The ordination line they established has lasted in Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore to the present day.

The founding of the Bhikṣuṇī Sangha was a momentous event in the history of China, as it opened up for women the possibility of an institutional religious vocation free from domestic duties. Women with literary or religious talents could now devote their time to study, meditation, and devotion. Many nuns gained renown for their mastery of classical Chinese literature as well as Buddhist texts. Unfortunately, the rules of their order required that their convents be built within city walls; they thus incurred all the disadvantages of being close to the centers of political power. Open to charges of corruption when they were perceived as wielding too much influence in the imperial courts, they were among the first to bear the brunt of any imperial crackdowns on Buddhist monastic orders.

The other notable development during this period was the widespread conversion of the ruling elites to Buddhism, beginning in the early decades of the fourth century. Particularly in the south, sons and daughters of noble families, many of whom had been orphaned during the warfare at the end of the Western Chin, entered the monastic orders. Already versed in the Chinese classics, their urbanity and erudition helped in spreading the religion among their fellow members of the nobility, as they brought home the point that a Buddhist could be “one of us.” Although many of the elite monks took ordination because of a true sense of spiritual need, some were attracted to the monastic life as a new version of the traditional life of the retired scholar, who chose a lifestyle of rustic simplicity to devote himself fully to art, literature, and philosophical conversation. As a result, Buddhist themes began appearing in the traditional scholar’s domains of painting and literature during the fourth century.

The conversion of the elites, together with the continued spread of Buddhist devotion among the lower classes, brought about a three-way split in the modes of Sangha life: large monastic estates patronized by the ruling elites, smaller village monasteries, and forest hermitages for monks who focused on meditation and/or literary pursuits. In principle, the Sangha, in contrast to Chinese society in general, was relatively free of class distinctions. People from the lower classes who showed intellectual promise could find in the monastic orders an opportunity for a literary education that was otherwise closed to them. However, there was a general tendency for members of the smaller village monasteries to remain illiterate, their Buddhism an amalgam of devotional practices and local spirit cults. Similarly, in the forest hermitages there was little concern for the Vinayas, and the monks tended to combine the methods of Buddhist meditation with traditional Taoist practices aimed at immortality. Unlike the great monastic estates, the smaller monasteries and hermitages remained outside the pale of government control. These tendencies characterized Buddhism for many centuries in both the north and south.

On the level of elite Buddhism, however, the northern and southern kingdoms differed widely. In the south, the monks and nuns who frequented the court were members of the Chinese elite, moving naturally among their own kind, speaking the same language and inhabiting the same intellectual universe as the members of the court. The sense of fellow identity they were able to cultivate enabled them to succeed in exerting the independence of the Sangha from the political realm without engendering any sense of threat. In 340 and again in 402, the question arose as to whether monastics should pay deference to the emperor, and on both occasions the ultimate decision was that they should not. Occasionally the sense of easy familiarity between rulers and the aristocratic monks backfired. Po Yuan, the first Chinese monk known to have developed a personal friendship with a member of the imperial house, so impressed his host that he was asked to leave the Sangha and join the court. When he refused, he was whipped to death. The same fate befell his brother. On the whole, though, the relationship between the Sangha and the southern rulers was stable and secure.
Not so in the north. Northern elite Buddhism was largely a continuation of the earlier pattern, in which missionary monks were of foreign extraction and depended largely on their psychic powers to gain favor with the court. A prime example was Fo-tu-teng, who arrived in north China from Kucha around 310. He served as court advisor for more than 20 years, performing magic, forecasting the future, mitigating the excesses of the barbarian rulers, and training a cadre of disciplined and enterprising Chinese monks. Fo-tu-teng had no pretensions to being a scholar. The Buddhism that grew under his influence stressed devotion and meditation, rather than intellectual sophistication. The lack of class and racial fellowship between monks and rulers, however, meant that the relationship in the north was more volatile than in the south, with the government alternating between lavish support for and severe repression of the Sangha. Twice—in 446 and 574—edicts were issued for the total suppression of Buddhism, in response to complaints from government officials that the Sangha was growing too strong. However, because none of the rulers involved controlled all of China, the monastics could escape with copies of their scriptures to other parts of the empire. In both cases the repression was short-lived, as Buddhism had acquired widespread popular support, and in both cases the ruling dynasties did their best to make up for the harm that had been done. In 460, for example, the ruler of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) undertook the creation of one of the world’s great religious monuments, the cave temples of Yün-kang, as an act of expiation for the earlier persecution.

Another long-lasting contribution to Chinese Buddhism had been made earlier by the founder of the Northern Wei dynasty, who appointed a moral and learned monk to the civil service post of Sangha director, thus establishing government jurisdiction over the monasteries in his realm. This arrangement was followed by all succeeding dynasties up to the twentieth century. Unlike the monks in the south, the appointed monk did not fight for the Sangha’s independence from the state but paid deference to the emperor, justifying his action by identifying the emperor as an emanation of the Tathāgata.

However, the most important development of this period, in both the north and south, was Buddhism’s new prominence in Chinese intellectual life. The first step in this process, begun by the elite monks of the south during the fourth century, was to apply Buddhist ideas to issues that had been raised in Confucian and Taoist intellectual circles during the third century. Ultimately, proponents of this “Buddho-Taoism” began to realize that they were distorting the Buddha’s message and so began efforts to understand Buddhism on its own terms. This prepared the way for the great monk-translator Kumārajiva, who arrived in Ch’ang-an and inaugurated a period in which scholars focused on mastering Indian scholastic treatises and finding order in the much more extensive picture of Buddhism that resulted.

8.4.1 Buddho-Taoism

To understand Buddho-Taoism and its impact on the subsequent centuries of Buddhist thought in East Asia, it is necessary to backtrack and deal in some detail with the issues of third-century intellectual life in China. The third century had been a period of great philosophical activity in China, one that was to determine the vocabulary and values the Chinese used in trying to make Buddhism intelligible to themselves for many centuries afterward. Trained bureaucrats focused on what was, for them, the central issue of philosophy: the art of government. Because they felt that any successful government had to harmonize with the principles underlying nature, their discussions modulated quickly from social philosophy to metaphysics and back. The event that sparked their philosophizing—termed kuan chu (Speculative Metaphysics)—was the fall of the Han dynasty: Why had the dynasty failed even though it had been run in accordance with the teachings of the Confucian classics? Was there something wrong with these classics, or had they simply been misapplied?

The masters of Speculative Metaphysics decided that the problem lay primarily in the interpretation of the classics and not in the classics themselves. They made a distinction between the basic principles underlying the insights of the classic thinkers and the way in which those principles had been expressed. The more an expression took into account the particulars of the situation it addressed, the farther it was from the basic principle. Thus these masters of Speculative Metaphysics developed a preference for what later generations came to call “sudden” expressions—those that expressed in most immediate terms the basic principles—over “gradual” expressions, which made use of expedient means that in some cases were a necessary bridge from the principle to a particular situation, but in other situations might prove misleading. This preference carried over into the study and practice of Buddhism and may explain why many Buddhist thinkers and meditators later tried so hard to avoid any indication that their teachings were “gradual.”

Once the principle underlying the text was separated from its expression, the question arose as to how the principle was to be grasped. Here Wang Pi (226–249) and other members of the first generation of masters of Speculative Metaphysics (called the proponents of “nonbeing”) borrowed a concept from the Taoist texts: that the realm of differentiated and nameable phenomena, which they termed being, came from a common principle that was undifferentiated and nameless, which they termed nonbeing. Nonbeing was the essence of all phenomena, whereas being was the function of nonbeing. Words were adequate for expressing phenomena, but not for their underlying principle. Again, this distinction between essence and function, and the strong sense that words were incapable of expressing underlying essences, were to play a large role in Chinese Buddhist thought.

Because nonbeing was the ultimate principle underlying not only the universe but also any form of government that attempted to harmonize with nature, the way to intuit this principle was for the Ruler to attain a frame of mind in touch with the undifferentiated and unnamed. Thus attuned, he would be able to make spontaneous decisions that, in a natural pattern of stimulus and response between Ruler and heaven, would lead to the harmony of society and the world of phenomena in general.

This line of thinking sparked a reaction from a group of intellectuals, led by Juán Chi (210–263), who insisted that if the same principle underlay all beings and could be touched by a completely natural mind, everyone had the ability to touch it and the right to do whatever came spontaneously. These thinkers
practiced what they taught and became known for flouting almost every social convention imaginable. Although their position was never widely adopted, it remained an undercurrent in Chinese society in the belief that people who behave unconventionally are either insane or else directly in touch with a higher principle. This belief also had an effect on attitudes toward unconventional Buddhist meditation masters in later centuries.

However, solid pillars of society, such as Hsiang Hsiu (circa 221–300), could not countenance this call for anarchy, so they reformulated the basic principles of Speculative Metaphysics in response. Because they used these new principles to interpret Taoist classics as a way of undercutting their opponents, their thought has been termed neo-Taoism. In their day, however, the neo-Taoists were termed the proponents of “being.” Their basic position was that there is no single underlying principle of the universe, and no difference between essence and function. Words are thus perfectly adequate for expressing the essence of things. Each individual thing or living being arises spontaneously, uncaused, with its own allotted place in the totality of things, its spontaneous nature being to function in its allotted way. Good and evil for different individuals are thus relative to how well they follow their individual function. Only the Sage (Ruler) has the allotment to know the allotment of all individuals under heaven, and to lie above their relative norms of good and evil. Thus only he has the right to be in a natural relationship of stimulus and response with the forces of heaven.

This reformulation succeeded in closing the door on anarchy and defending the status quo. However, it could not account for the source of the allotment of things and made the basic structure of the universe seem arbitrary and amoral. It was with regard to this point that many Chinese thinkers at the beginning of the fourth century realized that Buddhism had something to offer to their discussion. The doctrine of karma and rebirth offered a moral structure to the universe and to the pattern of stimulus and response between humanity and its environment, at the same time accounting for the allotment of all phenomena. Chinese monks—such as Chi Tung (314–366)—also realized that the Perfection of Discrimination doctrines of emptiness and the two levels of truth were relevant to the discussion. Some of them discerned that the doctrine of emptiness agreed with the teachings claiming that things had no underlying essence—although nothing arose spontaneously—in that all things were part of an interdependent causal web. Others viewed emptiness as the essence from which all things came—like the Tao—and to which they would all return. These views resurfaced several centuries later and formed the basis for the great doctrinal syntheses of the sixth to ninth centuries.

The important development in the fourth century, however, was that Buddhism gained recognition as a source of solutions for issues that had been plaguing Chinese thought. The contribution of Chinese monks to these issues was also momentous in sociological terms. It ended the bureaucratic monopoly on metaphysical speculation, bringing it into the religious cloister, where the goal of speculation was more personal than political. In principle it also opened the role of Sage—the wise person who could attain a state of mind in touch with the basic essence of the universe, which had long been the Ruler’s monopoly—to men and women from all levels of society. At the same time, this opening of roles did not pose the threat of anarchy, because the nature of that essence was expressed through the workings of karma, and thus thoroughly moral.

In the course of making this drastic shift in Chinese intellectual life, some of the monks responsible for Buddha-Taoism began to realize how little they actually understood Buddhist. Chief among them were Tao-an (312–383) and his disciple, Hsi-yuan (334–circa 416). Tao-an was the most illustrious of Fo-tu-t’eng’s disciples. Driven from Ch’ang-an by civil war, he established a center in the south and joined the Buddhist-Taoist discussions. As he collected and cataloged copies of the scriptures to aid in his work, he was struck by the gaps and inconsistencies in the various translations then available. When in 379 he was captured by northern forces and taken back to Ch’ang-an at the request of the new emperor, a Tibetan, he went back with a plan. He opened the first translation bureau to be granted imperial support and succeeded in attracting not only Indian monks knowledgeable in Buddhist texts but also a high-caliber team of Chinese scribes. Monks were dispatched to Khotan to bring back reliable texts. In the few years before his death, the bureau was able to translate an important body of literature, mostly Sarvāstivādin. In this it laid the groundwork for the major accomplishments of Kumārajiva, the monk-scholar from Kucha who was to change the face of Chinese Buddhist doctrine.

8.4.2 The Rise of Buddhist Scholasticism

Kumārajiva (344–413) was brought to Ch’ang-an in 401 as bounty from a military conquest. The son of an Indian nobleman and a Kuchean princess, he had ordained as a novice at an early age and traveled to India, together with his mother, who had been ordained as a nun, where he was converted to Madhyamaka doctrines. Famous in China for his command of Buddhist doctrine even before his capture, Kumārajiva inaugurated an extensive translation project in cooperation with hundreds of monks. The quality of their work far surpassed that of previous translators in terms of accuracy, intelligibility, and elegance. Even though they were still flawed on technical points, many of these translations are highly regarded even today as exemplars of the old translation style, in preference to the later and more accurate new translation style developed in the seventh century by Hsüan-tsang (circa 596–664). Kumārajiva’s lyrical version of the Lotus Sūtra, for example, has been chanted daily by millions of Buddhists throughout East Asia for centuries.

Kumārajiva’s contributions to Chinese Buddhism, however, went beyond the translation of texts. He lectured his translation team and other audiences on the importance of understanding Buddhist ideas in their original doctrinal context. Although he translated a variety of Mahāyāna and—at the request of his captors—Mainstream texts, his specialty was Madhyamaka. In his commentaries, prefaces, and lectures, he gave his Chinese disciples a thorough grounding in the subject. Although his school of disciples was scattered by an invasion of Ch’ang-an in 420, this disbanded had the long-term effect of disseminating his ideas throughout China, inaugurating a new era in Chinese Buddhist studies. During the fifth and sixth centuries, monks formed study groups specializing in particular texts: Madhyamaka treatises, Vinaya texts (Sarvāstivādin and Dharmaguptaka), Yogācāra
Although Wen-ti had enforced throughout the empire the southern principle that monastics need not pay deference to government officials, he adopted the northern tradition of state control over the Sangha. The T’ang ruling house claimed to be descended from the Taoist sage Lao-tzu, so their general sentiments were not pro-Buddhist. A few of the rulers converted to Buddhism and lavished enormous donations on the Sangha, only to be followed by successors who felt the need to undo their predecessors’ excesses and bring the religion back in line. In the first two centuries of the dynasty, however, anti-Buddhist measures were fairly circumscribed. The religion had broad support outside of the court, and rulers feared that excessively harsh measures would backfire.

One of the highlights of the first century of the T’ang occurred in 645, when the pilgrim-monk Hsüan-tsung (596–664) returned from his journey to India bringing more than 675 Buddhist texts. The story of his journey fired the imagination of the Chinese people, and they gave him a hero’s welcome on his arrival at Ch’ang-an. Gaining imperial support for a translation team to render his collection of texts into Chinese, he ultimately converted the emperor, T’ai-tsung (r. 626–649), to Buddhism. Sadly, he lived to translate only a small portion of the texts he had brought back. His translation team was undoubtedly the most talented ever assembled on Chinese soil. He and his coworkers developed a new, more accurate vocabulary for rendering Buddhist ideas into Chinese, but only one text using this vocabulary—the Heart Sūtra, a compendium of Perfection of Discrimination teachings—ever gained popularity. At his death, the reigning emperor, whose personal admiration for Hsüan-tsung did not extend to Buddhism, ordered the translation team disbanded and the remaining untranslated texts placed in an imperial library. They were never translated. The Yogācāra school founded by Hsüan-tsung—called Fa-hsiang (Dharma Characteristic)—survived no more than a century in China. This was due partly to its unpopular assertion that not all beings were eligible for Buddhahood, and partly to concerted attacks from the Hua-yen school, its major competitor for imperial patronage. However, the school did continue in Korea and Japan. Hsüan-tsung’s influence on Chinese Buddhism lived on less in his scholarship than in the tales that developed around his journey, which provided the model for the classic novel Journey to the West (see Section 8.7).

Another landmark in the Buddhist history of the T’ang was the reign of Empress Wu (circa 625–706). Beginning her life in court as a concubine of Emperor T’ai-tsung and continuing as the major wife of his son, Wu Chao skillfully maneuvered herself into a position of power before her husband’s death by eliminating her rivals. Not content to rule as regent for her son, she declared herself emperor and established a new dynasty. Unable to gain support from Taoists or Confucians, she sought to solidify her precarious position as a woman ruler by claiming to be the incarnation of Maitreya and actively cultivating the support of the Sangha, who obliged her by reporting omens and claiming to have discovered texts that justified her rule. Although much of this activity was of dubious benefit to the religion, she did sponsor important translation teams—on occasion working as a scribe herself—and actively patronized the Ch’an and Hua-yen schools.

After Empress Wu was driven from the throne in 705, a descendant of the original T’ang line, Hsüan-tsung (r. 712–756), came to power, determined to correct what he viewed as the Sangha’s abuse of its privileged position. Although many imperially supported monasteries had used their wealth for charitable purposes, such as alms houses for the poor, there were genuine abuses that needed correcting. Many monks and nuns had become ordained simply to evade taxation and live comfortably off the generosity of lay donors. Some monasteries were blatant business enterprises, occupying prime commercial locations near markets. Others, called “merit cloisters,” were tax havens for the aristocrats who had built them and who were still receiving proceeds from the land. One of Hsüan-tsung’s first moves to regulate Buddhism was a “sifting and weeding” of the monasteries on imperial rosters. More than thirty thousand monks and nuns were defrocked, approximately one-fourth of the registered monastics in the empire. Although Hsüan-tsung planned further moves against the Sangha, these were prevented by political developments.

Ironically, during this selective purge Hsüan-tsung had begun to patronize Tantric Buddhist missionaries, Indian initiates into the Yoga Tantras (see Section 6.2.1). Chinese Tantrism, called Chen-yen, or Truth-Word, flourished at the court for a little less than a century, during which time its initiates performed rituals for producing rain and protecting the state. Archaeologists have uncovered lavishly decorated caves west of Ch’ang-an in which some of these rituals took place. Upon the death of the last Tantric advisor to the court, Amoghavajra (705–774), Chen-yen died out in China, although it spawned schools in Korea and Japan, with its Japanese offshoot—Shingon—existing to the present day.

Hsüan-tsung’s reign is regarded as the peak of T’ang art, poetry, and culture, but it also marked the beginning of the end of the dynasty. The debilitating An Lu-shan rebellion (755–764), together with widespread famine, left a large death toll and brought about a breakdown of administrative control. The rebellion did both immediate and long-term damage to the Sangha. The immediate damage lay in the destruction of many monasteries and the total demise of Hsüan-tsung’s Fa-hsiang school. The long-term damage was caused by a government policy devised to raise money for the financially strapped imperial treasury. Official certificates granting permission to ordain were offered to anyone who would pay a flat fee. This reversed a centuries-long practice of tight state controls over ordinations, and huge numbers of people responded. Although the policy raised the needed funds, it continued unchecked for decades after the rebellion, devaluating the tax rolls and filling the monasteries with tax dodgers. In 830 it was estimated that there were twice as many monks and nuns as there had been in 730. Even Buddhists were complaining that the policy was destroying their religion.

Clearly, something had to be done, but no ruler had either the desire or the will to effect any major restrictions until Emperor Wu-tsong (r. 840–846) came to the throne. A fervent seeker of immortality, Wu-tsong was driven more by religious zeal than by political considerations. When his Taoist priests convinced him that their efforts to make him immortal were being foiled by the preponderance of “black” in the empire—black being the color of the Buddhist monastic robe—he determined to wipe Buddhism from the face of China. In a series of edicts dating from 842 to 845, he succeeded in destroying more than 4,600 temples and 40,000 shrines across the empire, and forcing 260,500 monks and nuns back to lay life. The Japanese monk Ennin happened to be studying in China at the
time and left behind a graphic account of the sufferings incurred not only by the Sangha but also by those who had come to depend on it. Slave families who had been assigned to monasteries were separated, and the poor were evicted from monastic almshouses. Military governors in a few regions resisted the edicts, and lay Buddhists gave shelter to some of the monks and nuns, but in general the purge was as thorough as any a pre-modern state could inflict on its citizens.

Shortly after his most strident anti-Buddhist edicts, Wu-tsung began suffering from the effects of his immortality medicines, issuing demands that live sea otters and the hearts and livers of 15-year-old youths and maidens be brought to the palace for his potions. Within a few months he was dead, poisoned by his quest for immortality, at age 32. Buddhists immediately interpreted his death as karmic retribution for his persecution of the religion. Whatever disdain later emperors may have felt for Buddhism, this perception may account for the fact that there were no more purges of the Sangha until the twentieth century.

Wu-tsung's successor, Hsuen-tsung (r. 846–859), attempted to reestablish the religion, although he proceeded cautiously in the face of continued anti-Buddhist feeling in the court. Nonetheless, he and his successors had managed to reopen monasteries and reorganize large numbers of monastics when a second blow came in the form of the Hwang Ch'ao Rebellion (875–884). Although this rebellion was not directed against Buddhist institutions per se, many monasteries were destroyed in the mayhem. After the rebellion, the power of the imperial house was so sapped that it could do little to help the Sangha. The dynasty fell in 907, and not until 970 was the empire reunited.

The double blow of persecution and rebellion at the end of the T'ang had a devastating effect on Chinese Buddhism. In particular, the destruction of monastic libraries meant that the great scholastic schools were damaged almost beyond repair. Tien-t'ai and Hua-yen, the most important of the schools, revived somewhat in the Sung dynasty only because some of their texts had been sequestered in Korea. Even the traditions that depended more on oral transmission, Ch'an and Ching-te (Pure Land), were damaged as well. Of the nine Ch'an meditation lineages existing before the persecution, only two survived the end of the dynasty. The texts that had formed the theoretical basis for Pure Land practice were mostly destroyed. Nevertheless, even in their truncated form, these innovative schools continued to have an influence in later centuries. We can only conjecture what might have developed if more of their breadth and variety had been allowed to survive the end of the dynasty that had spawned them.

8.5.1 T'ien-t'ai

T'ien-t'ai (Heavenly Terrace), the first of the great multisystem schools, took its name from the mountain in Chekiang where its principal center was located. Although Hui-su (515–576) is honored as the school's founder, the first true architect of the T'ien-t'ai system was his student Chih-i (538–597). That system underwent change through the T'ang and Sung dynasties, with many of the changes reverently incorporated by T'ien-t'ai editors into their editions of Chih-i's writings. As a result, although the major outlines of the system can apparently be ascribed to Chih-i, it is difficult to determine which other elements of the system are genuinely his. Here we will give an sketch of the teachings that the T'ien-t'ai school has attributed to him, with the caveat that some of those teachings may actually postdate him by centuries.

As mentioned previously (see Section 8.4.2), the major issue facing Chinese Buddhist thinkers in the fifth and sixth centuries was how to find a comprehensive framework to encompass and explain the great variety of Buddhist doctrines and practices emanating from India. Chih-i offered a solution to this problem based on the insight that theory and practice could not be separated. The study of doctrine should ideally be undertaken in the context of practice, just as meditational and devotional practice is a means of gaining further understanding of doctrine. The need for practice comes from an inherent limitation in language: Ultimate truth lies beyond words. From this it follows that all true statements can at best be only partially adequate; their opposite may also be partially true. Thus the statement that comes closest to expressing ultimate truth are the middle or "complete" ones that encompass seeming contradictions, pointing out how both sides of the contradiction are true although neither is truly false. From this principle, Chih-i was able to build a system of great complexity and subtlety for comprehending the entire range of Buddhist doctrines and practices.

Chih-i applied this approach to what he called the three discerements of Buddhism: the provisional discerement of existing dharmas, represented by the Abhidharma; the ultimate discerement of emptiness, represented by Madhyamaka; and the middle or complete discerement of the dharmadhatu (Dharma-element), taught in the Lotus, Avatamsaka, and Nirvana Sutra. This last discerement points directly at the highest principle underlying the cosmos, while at the same time comprehending the truth and limitations of the provisional and ultimate discerements. Chih-i was sophisticated enough to realize that even the complete discerement was not an entirely adequate expression of the Dharma-element; it was simply as close as language could get. Hence his insistence that study be paired with practice, for only then could complete Awakening be fully realized.

Chih-i classified both doctrinal teachings and meditational practices into three categories: sudden, those that pointed directly to the Dharma-element; gradual, those that used expedient means; and variable, those that mixed sudden and gradual approaches in a variety of ways. Encompassing all these approaches was the complete approach, which Chih-i tried to provide in his two great works: The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra (Fa-hua hsin-tan), dealing with doctrine; and The Great Calming and Contemplation (Mo-ho chih-hsuan), dealing with meditation practice.

Chih-i followed a passage in the Nirvana Sutra, classifying the Buddha's teachings into five flavors corresponding to five dairy products. The first flavor, corresponding to milk, includes the very earliest Buddhist texts; the second flavor, the cream, includes the Sutra Pitaka; the third flavor, the curds, corresponds to the great Mahayana Sutras, such as the Similas and the Vimalakirti-nirdesa; the fourth flavor, the butter, corresponds to the Perfection of Discernment Sutras; and the fifth flavor, the ghee, corresponds to the Nirvana Sutra itself. Just as cream comes from milk, and curds from cream, and so forth, the later Sutras come from the earlier ones, being neither identical with nor different from them. Chih-i,
following traditions that had developed within China during his time, made two changes in this lineup. The first flavor, he said, was the sudden flavor of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, which the Chinese believed was the first sermon the Buddha delivered immediately after his Awakening. It was called sudden both because it was as direct as possible an expression of the Dharma-element, and also because it made no concessions to the capacities of its listeners. Most who heard it were bewildered. Thus the Buddha retraced his steps and began formulating the body of gradual teachings that make up the Sūtra Pitaka.

Chih-i's second main change in the lineup was to include the *Lotus Sūtra* under the fifth flavor as the most perfect expression of the Buddha's teachings. This was because it had the same "sudden" message as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, but illustrated the message with expedient similes and explanations that made its meaning perfectly clear to all its listeners. Thus it represents Buddhist doctrine at its most complete.

As with all categories in Chih-i's thought, these flavors are relative; because no words can adequately express the Dharma-element, all teachings are gradual to some extent; because all the teachings come from an Awakened mind, they are all partially sudden. This relativity is what gives Chih-i's categories, which otherwise would have become little more than sorting boxes, nuance and complexity. Because they are relative, they are also interpenetrating. The realization of this point constitutes the highest teaching that principle cannot be found apart from phenomena. Even though distinctions are made between shallow and profound, and so forth, all truths are universally coextensive. The entire cosmos is immmanent in a moment of thought and is perceived simultaneously by the Awakened mind as empty, substantial, both, and neither.

To show the way to this realization, Chih-i wrote the most extensive and comprehensive meditation guide that had ever appeared in China. Again, he made a distinction between sudden, gradual, and variable approaches. The gradual approach makes use of various expedient objects, such as the breath, nien-jō (the repetition of the Buddha's name), liturgy, or contemplation of the *Lotus Sūtra* (the method that had given rise to Chih-i's own first experience of great samādhi). The sudden approach focuses immediately on the Dharma-element as its object from the moment that bodhicitta occurs. Here again, the distinctions are relative. The Dharma-element is present in all mental moments; thus all meditation methods are in a sense sudden. Because in the ultimate sense the Dharma-element transcends the subject–object dichotomy, it cannot be an object. Thus all approaches are to some extent gradual. The complete approach, which follows on the sudden, entails contemplating the mind in all postures, simply viewing its passing states as partial expressions of the Dharma-element. However, Chih-i advised that contemplation of mind be practiced in conjunction with the more gradual methods; otherwise, simply viewing good and bad states coming and going, one might be misled into believing that there was no practical need to distinguish right and wrong. In this manner, his view of the total practice encompassed the particulars without denying their validity.

Issues of sudden and gradual, verbal doctrine and practice, and principle and phenomena coalesce in Chih-i's analysis of the question of the identity between the mind and the Dharma-element, which is the overarching framework of the T'ien-t'ai system, working out in full detail the initial insight of the system, that study and practice cannot be separated. In the course of the practice, one proceeds step-by-step through six levels of identity, beginning with identity in principle—the identity that adheres between principle and phenomena in general, even before acquaintance with the Buddha's teaching. In the second level, one moves on to verbal identity, that is, the intellectual understanding that the mind and the Dharma-element are identical. On this level, one engages in a study of gradual, sudden, and complete teachings so as to perfect one's verbal understanding, at the same time learning the limits of language, thus appreciating the necessity for practice. The third through fifth levels correspond to the three stages of practice—gradual, sudden, and complete—culminating in the sixth level, ultimate identity, or the full attainment of Buddhahood. One had to understand these six levels at the outset, Chih-i maintained, for otherwise one would be led either to the arrogance of thinking that one was already fully identical with the Dharma-element before the practice, or to discouragement in thinking that one had nothing in common with the goal. Again, the complete view overcomes the limitations inherent in an either–or dichotomy, encompassing and transcending the partial truth and falsity of one-sided views.

Comparing these six levels with Asaṅga's teachings on the phases of discernment in the practice (see Section 5.3.2) shows how the outlines of Chinese Mahāyāna thought do not differ as radically from those of Indian Mahāyāna as many writers have assumed. The first level corresponds to Asaṅga's assertion that all dharmas are originally pure. The second and third levels correspond to his phase of preparatory discernment; the fourth level to the phase of nondual discernment; and fifth level to the phase of subsequent discernment, encompassing both the preparatory and nondual phases, and yielding ultimately in full Buddhahood, the sixth level in the T’ien-t’ai system.

T’ien-t’ai had a far-reaching influence on East Asian Buddhism. Its doctrinal synthesis framed the issues for all later efforts at explaining Buddhist doctrine. Similarly, its synthesis of ritual, liturgy, and devotional practices provided the framework for these aspects of Buddhist practice throughout East Asia. And its approach to meditation formed the matrix in which the Ch’ān schools developed. Many later Ch’ān meditation guides, even into the eleventh century, repeated verbatim large portions of an abbreviated version of The Great Calming and Contemplation. Unlike some of the later Ch’ān schools, however, T’ien-t’ai did not depreciate gradual methods of teaching or practice. According to Chih-i, Buddhism was similar to a complete course of medical science. A person with a limited view might not see the necessity for certain medicines or techniques, but a truly skilled doctor knows the full range of illnesses and the need for a full array of techniques for dealing with them. However, the strength of the T’ien-t’ai system, its comprehensiveness, was also its weakness in that it required its followers to diffuse their energies in mastering all areas of doctrine and practice. This may be one of the reasons why, in the seventh century, many T’ien-t’ai monks went over to the newly developing Ch’ān schools.

During the sixth century, however, Chih-i and T’ien-t’ai in general received strong support from the Sui royal house, which felt that the school's integration of southern scholarship with northern meditation and devotional methods paralleled
its policy of political integration. The connection with the Sui, however, meant that the school was eclipsed during the early T’ang dynasty. In the eighth century, Chan-jan (711–782) revived the school in response to what he saw as the mistaken views of Hua-yen. Chan-jan was responsible for making the T’ien-t’ai a self-conscious school (tung), and for reformulating Chih-i’s views into a matrix that came to be the school’s slogan: the five periods and the eight teachings. The five periods corresponded to the five flavors; the eight teachings were actually two lists of four categories. The first list consisted of four methods of teaching: sudden, gradual, secret (one teaching that meant different things to different groups), and variable (one teaching that gave sudden results to one group and gradual results to another). The second list consisted of four doctrines: trivijaya (doctrines particular to Mainstream Buddhism, such as the Wings to Awakening); shared (common to both the Mainstream and the Mahāyāna); distinctive (exclusive to Mahāyāna); and complete (totally comprehensive). In this manner Chan-jan sorted out three separate ways of classifying the Buddha’s teachings—in terms of chronology, method, and doctrine—while at the same time tracing the complex relations among the three. Thus he managed to clear up an issue that the Hua-yen patriarch Fa-tsang had confused.

In the generations after Chan-jan, T’ien-t’ai scholars continued developing the school’s doctrines, often incorporating Hua-yen teachings on Original Mind. The school was practically wiped out during the troubled years of the ninth century, however. Texts were destroyed, and not until the latter part of the Five Dynasty period (907–960) was the ruler of Wu-Yüeh, located in Chekiang, able to send to Korea for copies of T’ien-t’ai texts to be brought back to China. The Korean monk Chegwan (d. 971) not only brought the texts but also composed a short summary of T’ien-t’ai doctrines (mistakenly attributing Chan-jan’s innovations to Chih-i), which became one of the standard texts of the school. Beginning in the eleventh century, T’ien-t’ai was established as the main surviving doctrinal school and T’ien-t’ai scholars during the Sung dynasty further refined the school’s doctrines, falling into two factions over whether to remove the Hua-yen elements that had earlier been incorporated into the teachings. The school’s earlier preeminence in meditation, however, was totally eclipsed by Ch’ān.

8.5.2 Hua-yen

Hua-yen, the second great multiscientific school, took its name from the Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament or Hua-yen) Sūtra—a vast collection of Sūtras that had coalesced around the Daśabhumika and Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtras—whose teachings formed the basis for many of the school’s doctrines. The philosophical tradition that developed from the Avatamsaka is only one aspect of its impact on Chinese Buddhism, which also included meditation practices, ascetic practices, upekkha, and a cult of the book surrounding the text of the Sūtra itself.

The philosophical tradition of Hua-yen is difficult to define, not only because of the inherent complexity of its teachings, but also because those teachings changed so radically over the course of the three centuries from the school’s first patriarch to its last. To convey a sense of this change, we will discuss the teachings of two patriarchs: the third, Fa-tsang (643–712), who was the school’s first great architect; and the fifth, Tsung-mi (779–840), a Ch’ān patriarch who recast Hua-yen thought in a way that made it relevant to Ch’ān practice.

Fa-tsang differed with the T’ien-t’ai teachings on the issue of the One Vehicle taught in the Lotus Sūtra (see Section 5.2.3). According to T’ien-t’ai, the One Vehicle was a blanket term for the three vehicles of śrāvaka, pratyeka-buddha, and bodhisattva. According to Fa-tsang, the One Vehicle was actually a separate vehicle, superior to all the others. Although it shared some common points with standard Mahāyāna, it also possessed special doctrines of its own, which Fa-tsang identified with the teaching in the Avatamsaka Sūtra. Whereas ordinary Mahāyāna Sūtras saw reality in terms of the unimpeded interpenetration of principle and phenomena, the Avatamsaka saw reality in terms of the unimpeded interpenetration of phenomena with all other phenomena in the cosmos. The image illustrating this view is that of Indra’s net: a net of fine filaments stretching in all directions with a jewel at each interstice. Each jewel reflects all the other jewels in the net, so that each reflects the reflections in all the other jewels, on to infinity. This viewpoint is said to be that of a Buddha. Thus, much of Fa-tsang’s metaphysics is concerned with the phenomenology of Awakening: what the cosmos looks like to an Awakened one.

Fa-tsang’s analysis begins with the teaching from The Awakening of Faith that describes how the entire cosmos comes from the One Mind expressed in two aspects: principle and phenomena. Principle here means the mind as understood from the perspective of Suchness, which transcends all dualities; phenomena means the mind as understood from the perspective of dependent co-arising. Each aspect has two sides: Principle is characterized both by immutability (it is unconditioned) and conditionness (it finds expression in conditioned things); phenomena are characterized by quasi existence (they function in a causal network) and emptiness (they have no separate essence of their own). Fa-tsang then goes on to demonstrate that principle cannot exist separately from phenomena. In fact, principle and phenomena are two sides of one thing. The quasi existence of phenomena is nothing other than the conditionness of principle. Following Nāgārjuna’s identification of emptiness with the law of dependent co-arising, the emptiness of phenomena is nothing other than the immutability of principle. Thus there cannot be one without the other.

From this equation, Fa-tsang goes on to claim that the entire cosmos is identical with the mind and body of the Buddha Mahāvairocana—the cosmic Buddha that the Avatamsaka Sūtra identifies as embodied in the universe as a whole (see Section 5.2.3)—for, according to him, the One Mind is Buddha-nature. Thus Buddha-nature is nothing other than the principle of dependent co-arising. This point underlies Fa-tsang’s conceptual model for the distinctive view of the One Vehicle—what he called “the dependent co-arising of the Dharma-element.” Mahāvairocana means Great Illuminator. The nature of the mind, from which the cosmos is made, is to reflect all that appears to it. Thus Fa-tsang’s basic metaphor for the process of mutually dependent co-arising is that of light and mirrors. Causes penetrate their effects, just as light penetrates a mirror. Effects embrace their causes, just as mirrors contain all the light that penetrates them. From this conception of causality, Fa-tsang makes three assertions about the dependent co-arising of the Dharma-element: (1) All phenomena interpenetrate one another.
In other words, because each phenomenon is empty—that is, a result of the combined effects of all other phenomena—it is penetrated by all other phenomena and embraces them all. Because each has quasi existence, participating in the conditioning of all other phenomena, each phenomenon penetrates them all and is embraced by them all. Thus, (2) all phenomena are identical, in that each phenomenon functions in the same way. (3) Because the totality of each part already contains that part, interpenetration is repeated infinitely, as in the image of India’s net.

Fa-tsang actively courted and won imperial patronage. According to his biography he explained the dependent co-arising of the Dharma-element to Empress Wu with a concrete image. In the middle of a room he placed a Buddha image and a lamp, representing the Buddha Mahāvairocana and the principle of dependent co-arising. He then placed mirrors in the 10 directions surrounding the Buddha image: the 8 major directions plus above and below the Buddha image. He then walked around the room to show that each mirror (phenomenon) contained not only the Buddha image (principle) but also all the other mirrors (phenomena), and that their mutual interpenetration repeated infinitely.

Fa-tsang worked out other implications of the dependent co-arising of the Dharma-element in terms of three pairs of characteristics: totality and particularity, identity and difference, and unity and individuality. With regard to the totality of all phenomena, each phenomenon is both a particular within the totality and equivalent to the totality itself. The argument here is that because each part depends on the whole, it is also the sole cause of the whole. This is because the lack of any one part means that the whole is lacking. However, each part is simply a part, because a whole has to be made up of parts. Thus, Fa-tsang says, particularity and totality are equivalent in this view of reality. With regard to the relationship between particular phenomena, because the existence of each phenomenon is its function—and because the function of each is identical, to act as a cause of the whole—each phenomenon is identical with every other single phenomenon. But because the cosmos as we know it has to be made up of different parts, each phenomenon has to be different from others. Thus their identity comes from their differences. With regard to all other particular phenomena, each phenomenon unites with the others in forming the whole, and yet each must maintain its individuality, for otherwise there would be no factors to keep forming the whole. Thus their unity comes from their individuality.

Fa-tsang did not expect his listeners to fully understand his paradoxical teachings. In fact, he felt that it would enough for them simply to accept the teachings on faith. He saw the bodhisattva path as consisting of 53 stages, but for him the tenth stage, accepting the dependent co-arising of the Dharma-element on faith, was the crucial one. As with the Mainstream Buddhist teachings (see Section 1.4.1), his view of the principle of interpenetration worked not only in the immediate present, but also across time. However, because he viewed the cosmos as already being identical with the mind and body of the Buddha Mahāvairocana, he regarded cause and effect as operating in both directions of time, forward as well as back: Because existence is function, the result is what makes the cause a cause, for without the result, the cause would not function as a cause, and thus would not exist as such. In this view, the attainment of the tenth stage already includes all the subsequent stages. On attaining this stage, one is already a bodhisattva and a Buddha. All that remains is to continue contemplating the emptiness and functioning of phenomena. Tranquility meditation, according to Fa-tsang, means viewing phenomena as empty. This gives rise to discernment, so that the mind does not dwell in samsāra. Insight meditation means to view emptiness functioning in the form of phenomena. This gives rise to compassion, in that all phenomena are identical, so that there is no dwelling in nirvāṇa. With a mind dwelling neither in samsāra nor nirvāṇa, one remains in the cosmos, acting out of wisdom and compassion, which is a Buddha’s true function.

Like many Mahāyānists, Fa-tsang viewed it as an act of selflessness for a bodhisattva to enter nirvāṇa, but he went further than most by decreeing a separate nirvāṇa a theoretical impossibility. According to him, there is no Unconditioned separate from the Conditioned. The universe already is the body and mind of the Buddha Mahāvairocana. Even if there were a separate unconditioned realm, no one could go there: until the entire universe went, grass and insects included. Because every part is interpenetrated by, identical with, and in union with every other part, all parts would have to go together. And, given the dazzling and marvelous nature of dependent co-arising, there is no reason to go. One attains Buddhahood by appreciating the wonder of the universe; and one continues to live in it eternally, acting out of discernment and compassion, attuned to its infinite ramifications.

These, at least, were the intended implications of Fa-tsang’s teachings. Chan-jan (see Section 8.5.1), however, saw other implications. Placed against the T’ien-t’ai doctrine of the six identities, Fa-tsang’s assertion—that Buddhahood was implicitly attained at the stage of accepting the right view of the universe—equated the second stage of identity with the sixth. This, Chan-jan said, would lead to the danger of arrogance. One would feel that because one was already Awakened, there was no need to practice morality or any other stages of the Path.

The issues surrounding morality later inspired Tsung-mi’s restating of Hua-yen doctrine. Tsung-mi was a master of the Ho-se school of southern Ch’ an, founded by Shen-hui (see Section 8.5.5). All southern Ch’ an schools taught a doctrine of sudden Awakening, according to which gradual practice could not give rise to a true understanding of the Buddha-nature. Because Awakening was unconditioned, gradual approaches to the immediacy of full understanding only got in the way. Thus some of the more radical Ch’ an schools advocated the abandoning of moral norms and formal meditation practice altogether. Recognizing the danger in this approach, Tsung-mi sought a doctrinal justification for his conviction that sudden Awakening had to be followed by gradual cultivation—including observance of moral principles and formal meditation—in order to integrate that Awakening fully into one’s life.

He found the justification he was looking for in the writings of Ch’ eng-kuan, the fourth Hua-yen patriarch, and so went to study with him. In the course of his studies, he learned much that suited his purposes, but the doctrines that were the hallmarks of the Hua-yen school—the separateness of the One Vehicle, the superiority of the Avatāmasaka Sūtra, the interpenetration of phenomena with phenomena—struck him as irrelevant. Thus he eventually abandoned or downplayed them in his own writings. Nevertheless, later generations counted him as the fifth patriarch of the school, largely because of the extensive use he made of the
Like many meditation masters of the time, Bodhiruci advocated the use of dhāraṇī for concentration. T’an-luan’s practice gradually developed into the nien-fo (recitation of the Buddha’s name). The term nien-fo in T’an-luan’s earliest writings referred generally to the practice of meditation. There are three possible meanings for the word nien: (1) concentration or meditation; (2) a length of time equal to one thought; hence, the expression shih-nien (10 nien) meant the length of time consisting of 10 thought-moments. This led eventually to a reinterpretation, as nien also means (3) vocal recitation, with the phrase shih-nien seen as meaning 10 recitations of the Buddha’s name.

T’an-luan organized societies for recitation of Amitābha’s name and propagated the Pure Land practice with great success. He also laid the foundations for its doctrine, declaring that even those who have committed evil deeds and atrocities are eligible for rebirth in the Western paradise if they sincerely desire it. However, those who revile the Dharma are excluded, he said, because blasphemy is not conducive to aspiration and because the karmic retribution for blasphemy is repeated rebirth in the lowest hell. Eventually, he came to advocate dependence on t‘n-li (other power) rather than on tzu-li (one’s own power), asserting that even the merit one seems to earn for oneself through nien-fo is facilitated by the overarchings power of Amitābha’s vows. Rebirth in the Pure Land and attainment of Buddhahood there are a result of this power. Thus, instead of meditation, the prime requisites of Pure Land practice became faith coupled with recitation of Amitābha’s name.

These two points—recitation rather than meditation, and the inclusion of sinners with those who can benefit from Amitābha’s vow—were the main Chinese departures from Indian Amitābha doctrines. T’an-luan’s motive in explaining away the Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtra’s statement claiming that grave sinners are excluded from the effect of Amitābha’s vow was his conviction that all living beings possess Buddha-nature, and thus none could be excluded from the bliss of his Pure Land. This conviction may account for the popularity of Pure Land in China.

By the sixth century, many Buddhists had become obsessed with the notion that the latter days of Buddhism had arrived. Indian texts, beginning with some of the Mainstream canons, distinguished two Dharma periods: the period of True Dharma (0–500 after the Parinirvāṇa [A.D.]), followed by a period of Semblance Dharma. To these two stages, Chinese texts had added a third period, that of the Latter-day or Degenerate Dharma, (expected to begin either 1000 or 1500 A.D., depending on the source, and lasting ten thousand years). Sixth-century Chinese dated the Parinirvāṇa at 949 B.C.E., which meant that the Latter-day Dharma would begin about 550 C.E. Thus there was a receptive audience for teachings and practices appropriate for a degenerate age, promising rewards in a better world. This was precisely what T’an-luan’s Pure Land offered. It placed few intellectual or financial demands on its followers, and made no pretense that life in this world, even when in harmony with nature, could in any way be ideal.

The great T’ang masters of the two T’ai-hsien schools, Nei-fo and Shih-fo, were the first Pure Land masters to settle in the capital and was remarkably successful in spreading the faith there. Nien-fo was still the crucial religious act in his teaching—in fact, he recommended that it be repeated at all times, as a mantra—but he included other practices in addition to the recitation: meditation, morality, and scholarship. In this way he aspired to make Pure Land practice independent, rather than an appendage to other schools.

The last two great masters of this formative period were T‘u-min (680–748) and Fa-chao (late eighth century). Fa-chao was the first Pure Land master to teach in the T‘ang imperial court. His ecstatic method of reciting Amitābha’s name in five rhythms, which he equated with the five wonderful sounds to be heard in Sukhāvatī, proved very popular.

The Pure Land teachers developed a large body of texts, not only to spread their teachings among the general populace but also to defend their practice from the attacks of the more philosophical schools. Pure Land philosophy adopted the distinction between principle and phenomena to explain the need for the nien-fo. Just as principle cannot be perceived without recourse to phenomena, they said, true Buddha-nature cannot be grasped without recourse to simple expedient means.

However, the nature of Pure Land practice was such that it needed no great masters or philosophical texts. Although the texts of the Pure Land masters were destroyed in the turmoil of 845, the practice was so widely diffused that, aside from Ch‘an, it was the only Buddhist movement to survive the suppression relatively intact. Despite T‘ang emperors’ having followed it, neo-Confucian gentlemen, beginning with the twelfth century, disdained to participate in a practice that was both “vulgar” (because the common people adhered to it) and “foreign.” Their wives, however, continued to recite “na-mo a-mi-t‘o-fo” (“Homage to Amita Buddha”) and taught it to their children. To this day, a shortened version of the phrase, “O-mi-t‘o-fo,” is a common greeting and exclamation among older Chinese. No native Chinese god has ever commanded the universal worship that Amita has received. Even today, the faith is still strong among the vast majority of Chinese Buddhists, and “na-mo a-mi-t‘o-fo” is chanted regularly in the daily liturgy of Ch‘an monasteries.

8.5.4 The Three-Level Sect (San-chieh-chiao)

A related development during this period was the establishment of the Three-Level Sect (San-chieh-chiao). Like the Pure Land movement, this movement assumed the existence of three periods in the survival of Dharma after the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa. It took its name from its assertion that the three periods were characterized by the level of beings born during each. In the age of Degenerate Dharma, which had already arrived, beings were on so low a level that they were blind as to what the true Dharma might be. This sect’s founder, Hsin-hsing (540–592), taught that in such an age even the basic distinctions of language were uncertain, and that the only spiritual certainty lay in an attitude of universal reverence for all beings.

From this principle, he drew several ethical imperatives. The first was that no one should teach the Dharma. The second was that no one should make distinctions or pass judgment on anyone. The third was that the one reliably true religious activity was to be generous—an imperative that applied to monks and laity alike. For Hsin-hsing, generosity lay at the heart of all the bodhisattva’s perfections. Thus in 620 his followers in Ch‘ang-an established an “Exhaustible Treasury,” a credit
union and mutual financing society patterned after a model in the Vimalakirtinirmāṇa Sūtra. This project soon assumed enormous proportions. Capital accumulated at a rate defying the ability of accountants to keep track of it. Funds were dispersed for such projects as temple repair, relief for the sick and homeless, and religious rituals throughout the empire. According to accounts of the time, loans were always repaid when due, even though no interest was charged and no legal contracts were required of the borrowers.

Had the sect kept to its imperatives it might have stayed out of trouble, but it broke them by criticizing other people for not observing them as well. In particular, it began denouncing Sangha authorities as bogus monks who were enriching themselves by teaching a bogus Dharma. In response, these authorities sent appeals to the government to rein in the sect, appeals that were heeded only during reigns when the emperors were Buddhist and felt a personal responsibility to the Sangha. Finally, in 725, Hsian-tsung dissolved all of the sect’s monasteries, having closed the Inexhaustible Treasury in 721. The memory of the Treasury, however, has remained as a model and inspiration for Buddhism charitable organizations throughout East Asia up through the present.

8.5.5 Ch’an

The Ch’an (Dhyāna) school—better known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen—is the meditation tradition with the longest documented history in the Buddhist world. Throughout its history it has gone through periods of decline alternating with periods of renewal and reform, with each period of renewal rewriting the history of the school in line with its perception of contemporary issues facing it. Because of their polemical intent, these revisions have tended to obscure the school’s actual history, but the T’ien-huang documents have helped to uncover a more objective portrait of its early generations.

Ch’an is sometimes presented as a quintessentially Chinese form of Buddhism. However—regardless of how “Chinese-ness” might be defined—it is important to notice the elements of the Ch’an tradition that have parallels with the meditative traditions in other Buddhist cultures. We have noted (see Section 7.5.2) a tendency among Buddhist meditative traditions to become domesticated as the attainments of their teachers become widely known. In most cases, the traditions then die out within a few generations as material prosperity smothered the authenticity of the practice. Most extant early Ch’an writings date from the two main periods during which the tradition became domesticated: the period from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth century, and then again from the late tenth through the twelfth. This may simply be a historical accident, in that writings from other periods may have been destroyed, but comparison with the Kammatthana tradition suggests that this may not be an accident after all. A meditative tradition would tend not to leave written records until it became so famous that it felt compelled to define and defend its teachings beyond the immediate circle of person-to-person contact. The material support attendant on fame might also create factions within the tradition, as different groups jockeyed for support, and this would require the tradition to sort out which of its various lineages had deviated from the “authentic teaching” of the practice.

Further comparison with the Kammatthana tradition reveals another point in common: an ambivalent attitude toward established scholarly traditions. Meditative traditions must use the terminology established by the scholarly tradition to discuss their teachings and gauge their meditative experiences, but they may find the fashions of scholarship inimical to their approach. Scholars may champion spurious texts or mistaken interpretations of legitimate texts. On a more subtle level, even when scholarly theories are essentially correct, the tendency to focus on theory—and the attendant pride that can often develop from mastering theory—may obscure the direct experience of what the theory describes. These two concerns—to defend the school’s doctrines and practices from outside attack and inner deviation, and to prevent later generations from focusing on theory to the exclusion of seeing into their own minds—account for much of the form and content of Ch’an literature.

The literature produced during the two periods of the school’s domestication exhibits two approaches to these concerns. In the long run, the literature produced during the second period—which we will consider in Sections 8.6.1 and 8.6.2—was far more successful than that produced during the first. In fact, not until the second period did Ch’an actually become a unified school with an established body of doctrine and legendary tradition. Prior to that, the “school” was more a loose family of lineages, each with its own fluid amalgam of teachings and traditions, scattered through mountainous regions in central, southeastern, and southwestern China. Even after its establishment as a distinct school, Ch’an continued to split over several recurrent issues, the most prominent of them being the question of whether Ch’an practice was in harmony with traditional scriptural doctrines or was something entirely separate and unique.

The first Ch’an masters to gain widespread popular attention were members of the East Mountain School of Hupeh province, Hung-jen (circa 600–674) and his student Shen-hsiu (circa 606–706). Hung-jen attracted dozens of students, but not until 700, when Empress Wu invited Shen-hsiu to teach in the imperial palace and—in a dramatic display of veneration unprecedented for an emperor—publicly bowed down to his feet, did the school attain national prominence. Shen-hsiu wrote a number of texts describing the doctrines and practices of his school. Other students of Hung-jen also wrote texts, recording Hung-jen’s teachings and those of his predecessors, establishing a lineage going back through Mahākāśyapa to the Buddha himself. Some of them claimed that this lineage was transmitted through Bodhidharma, a fifth-century South Indian monk famous for his meditative prowess. In an attempt to compensate for the school’s lack of any clear basis in a particular Buddhist text, they also connected Bodhidharma with the Lankāvatāra Sūtra. Although modern scholarship indicates that the school’s connections with Bodhidharma, and his with the Lankāvatāra, were tenuous at best, later legends surrounding Bodhidharma claiming him as the First Patriarch of the school played a central role in the developing Ch’an mythology. According to the reckoning of the East Mountain School, Hung-jen was the Fifth Patriarch of the school, and Shen-hsiu the Sixth.

The most important doctrine for the school was the teaching of the Buddha-nature immanent in all living beings. Different members of the school dealt in different ways with the practical implications of this teaching, and in particular
with the question of how to regard mental defilements in light of the Buddha-nature’s intrinsic purity. Shen-hsiu approached the problem from two angles. When describing the practice from the outside, he stated that the pure mind and the defiled mind, though conjoined, were essentially separate, each with its own intrinsic reality. Neither generated the other. Thus the goal of the practice was to rid the mirror-like pure mind of any impurities. When describing the techniques used to rid the mind of its impurities, however, he recommended that the meditator regard the impurities as essentially unreal. Some of the practices he taught implied a sudden approach to Awakening; others, a more gradual approach.

Shen-hsiu’s school remained popular in the capital for several generations, but its popularity attracted controversy. In 730, a monk named Shen-hui (684–758)—a former student of Shen-hsiu and of Hui-neng, another student of Hung-jen—mounted a campaign attacking Shen-hsiu and his followers, whom he called the Northern School, for teaching a limited gradualistic and dualistic approach to the practice. Shen-hui insisted that the doctrine of the Buddha-nature’s essential purity meant that mental impurities were nonexistent, and that expedient efforts to remove those impurities were a distraction rather than a help in awakening to that nature. Shen-hui produced new and more dramatic stories of Bodhidharma to support his position on sudden or unmediated Awakening, and insisted that Hui-neng, about whom almost nothing is known, was Ch’an’s actual Sixth Patriarch.

Shen-hui was less a meditation teacher than an evangelist, focused on organizing ordinations and winning recruits to his Southern School. Although the emperor in 796 posthumously declared him the true Seventh Patriarch, he maintained this title only in the Ho-tse school he founded, which did not last beyond the persecutions of 845.

Shen-hui’s attack on gradualism, however, had a lasting effect on Ch’an rhetoric. No Ch’an school after his time openly advocated any doctrines or practices that might be labeled “gradual.” The term Southern School came to stand for any Ch’an lineage that taught a sudden Awakening, although records from T’ang-huang show that the Northern School taught a type of sudden Awakening as well. All the schools that lasted into the Sung dynasty claimed to be Southern, accepting Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch, and passing over Shen-hui in almost total silence. As for the Northern School, it continued until the tenth century, when it died out with the end of the T’ang.

In 780, one of the Southern Schools—the Ox-head School—composed the Platform Sutra to advance its interpretation of the distinction between the Northern and Southern Schools, at the same time providing Hui-neng with an attractive mythology. Whatever its historical accuracy, the Platform Sutra became one of the most influential texts in the development of southern Ch’an. Part of its appeal lay in its dramatic presentation of the “transmission” of the Dharma from Hung-jen to Hui-neng. Hung-jen, the story goes, asked his students to write poems on the wall to show the extent of their Awakening. Based on the poems submitted, Hung-jen would then choose his Dharma-heir. Shen-hui, considered the prime candidate for succession, wrote the only poem, which recommended a “complete” practice—in T’ien-t’ai terms—of clearing away the obstructions that block the recognition of Awakening in all things. The body, the poem said, was the Bodhi tree, and the mind was a stand for the mirror of Awakened awareness, from which the dust should continually be removed. Hui-neng, an illiterate layman working in the monastery kitchen, heard of the poem and asked to have his rebuttal written next to it. There are various recensions of the rebuttal, but all agree on the central image: Originally bodhi has no tree, the mirror has no stand, Awakening is originally pure, so where could dust arise? Hung-jen realized that Hui-neng alone was ready to fathom the teaching on emptiness and non-abiding, and so at night secretly invited him into his chambers and read the Diamond Sutra to him. Immediately, Hui-neng “received” the Dharma—that is gained Awakening—and so Hung-jen bestowed his robe on him as a sign of the transmission of the Dharma. The practice of a teacher ceremonially transmitting the Dharma to a student dates back to such texts as the Prajñāpana (see Section 4.3.2), but the Platform Sutra succeeded in enshrining this practice in Ch’an ideology, where it has continued to play an important role to the present day. It also helped to establish the Diamond Sutra as one of the school’s primary texts, and the Perfection of Discrimination teaching on non-abiding as one of the school’s primary teachings.

The practical implications of Hui-neng’s poem are contained in the Platform Sutra’s sudden teaching of “no-thought.” No-thought does not mean putting a stop to thoughts. Instead it means allowing successive thoughts to follow one another without interruption or without abiding. If a single thought were interrupted, the dharma body would be detached from the physical body, creating—in the image of the poem—a duality of “mirror stand” and “tree,” providing a place where thoughts could abide. If a single thought were to abide, succeeding thoughts would pile up, creating bondage. But when thoughts are allowed to flow without interruption or without abiding, that is simply the functioning of Suchness, which forms the essence of this thought-stream. There would then be no bondage to clear away, for the “bondage” had simply been the piling up of thoughts that were originally pure and now were allowed to flow. Thus, on realizing no-thought, one realizes Suchness and attains the status of Buddha.

The Sutra incorporates its teaching of no-thought into its definition of tao-ch’an (sitting meditation), which it expands on the Nirvāṇa Sutra’s assertion that concentration and discernment are identical. According to the Platform Sutra, sitting (corresponding to concentration) means not a physical posture, but the state of no-thought in any and all circumstances; meditation (corresponding to discernment) is the state of seeing Suchness without confusion. Thus concentration (the functioning of Suchness) is the essence of discernment, and discernment (the seeing of Suchness) the function of concentration.

The Sutra offers no further details as to whether this approach was to be combined with formal meditation techniques, or if it implied a rejection of techniques altogether. Various Southern Schools took up different sides on this question, but evidence suggests that the mainstream position retained formal techniques as the backbone of the practice, using the sudden perspective as a corrective to the pitfalls that formalism might entail. At the same time, the schools provided differing interpretations of the crucial poems in Hui-neng’s story. For instance, Tsung-mi, who traced his lineage back to Shen-hui, interpreted the poems as expressing the difference between gradual and sudden practice—rather than the Ox-head
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School's distinction between complete and no-thought practice—an interpretation that has proven influential to the present day. These debates continued until the persecutions of 845, although some lineages managed to stay in the mountains and avoid the controversy. In terms of their later influence, the most important of these provincial lineages hailed from the southeast, one beginning with Ma-tzu (709–788), whose first two generations of students included many who were to become famous in later Ch'an mythology, among them Huang-po (d. 850), Lin-ch'i (d. 866); and another beginning with Tung-shan (807–869). According to that mythology, these Ch'an masters developed a new teaching style that made heavy use of paradox, iconoclasm, cryptic statements, shouts, and beatings to jolt their students into a state of nondual chien-hsing (in Japanese, kenbuk), or seeing-nature, in which there is no duality between the seeing-awareness and the Buddha-nature seen. Although documents dating from the time of Ma-tzu and Tung-shan confirm the importance of chien-hsing in their teaching, the accounts of their unorthodox teaching methods were not written down until the tenth century, and so there is some doubt about the accounts' reliability. They may well be accurate, simply reflecting the fact that monks in the ninth century had different views from monks in the tenth century about what deserved to be written down, but no one now can know for sure. By the twelfth century, Five Houses had developed within the Ch'an school, three of them tracing their lineage back to Ma-tzu (most prominently the Lin-ch'i house) and one—the Ts'ao-tung house—to Tung-shan. However, historical records from the late T'ang show virtually no division among these lineages during the eighth and ninth centuries. Students of one master often studied under other masters with no sense of having crossed sectarian boundaries.

Because these provincial lineages avoided the capital, they were best positioned to survive the Huang Ch'ao Rebellion. In fact, they were the only lineages in any major school, meditative or scholastic, to continue unbroken through the turmoil at the end of the T'ang.

8.6 THE SUNG DYNASTY (970–1279)

The Sung dynasty witnessed a major restructuring of Chinese society, as the agrarian feudal economy of previous dynasties developed into an urban economy administered by a centralized bureaucracy. The major intellectual concern of the times was to recast Chinese culture into a comprehensive, harmonious form that could serve as a unifying ideology for the newly consolidated state. The emphasis on harmony and unity is understandable, considering the preceding centuries of warfare and upheaval. To ease the sense of alienation that such a major social shift might cause, writers of this period harked back to the golden age of Chinese civilization during the T'ang, which they claimed to be preserving even as they molded it into a radically new form.

These trends influenced Buddhism on many levels. On the level of popular devotion, the various pantheons of Taoist immortals, Buddhist bodhisattvas, and local spirits were organized in the popular imagination into a bureaucratic hierarchy, mirroring the political process occurring on Earth. Although this process