

**A discussion on the central set of philosophical tenets of
Hua-Yen Buddhism.**

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Table of Contents pg

Introduction 3
 Limitations 3
Delineating our World..... 4
Is the Map the Territory? 5
The Matrix 6
Relationship and Interconnectedness..... 9
The Part, further Parts and still more Parts..... 11
Conclusion 12

REFERENCES 14

Introduction

Common academic format requires delineating headings/concepts that have a discussion following under each heading. This method unfortunately tends to isolate parts and tends to put the topic on a pedestal for analysis. The Hua-Yen philosophy centralises itself on interconnectedness and interrelatedness. Hua-Yen questions the idea of reality and thus the author attempts to write this document in an academic manner yet in keeping with Hua-Yen principles. Thus, recognition of accepted academics has been adhered to, however each section was written in a way that connects to the other sections without attempting to introduce separation.

As this topic relates to epistemology, I cannot escape my own historical background as this forms the position to which I as the observing/analysing being conceptualises the world of my experience from my reference position. Thus, my belief system, language, attitude and ideas all affect the way that I know my world. Thus, it is in order and out of respect to the subject matter to briefly contextualise my epistemology, which forms my basis in attempting to describe my understanding of the Hua-Yen philosophy. This document was written from a Western background.

The Chinese Hua-Yen philosophy which has its genesis as early as the seventh century, is a relatively new way of thinking for the traditional westerner and departs radically from modernism and the current Western world's method of inquiry and understanding.

Limitations

MacIntyre (1987) touches on an important point regarding language and how it often translates to mean a different lived experience. A person who say for example is a member of the San Bushmen of the Kalahari and Botswana region, would have a different way of expressing their thoughts and communicating when viewed through the eyes of an outsider [Westerner]. While both may share similar existential values regarding birth, death and illness, the reasoning and conclusions might be different and incommensurable. From a biological perspective, Maturana and Varela (1987) explain how our experiences are mapped in our neurology, which in turn relates to how our thoughts come together to produce our epistemology.

MacIntyre (1987) gives an example of land ownership and how the view from one cultural perspective, namely the Spaniards, where individual property rights were status quo, differs from that of the Indian inhabitants in Northern America who had the belief of a common unownable land. Thus language is both an important means of exchange but also a limiting factor.

Cook (1977:109) highlights that “Buddhism is praxis, something that one does”. Attempting to understand Hua-Yen from purely a mental stance would fall short of grasping the true connectedness that Hua-Yen calls for. It would be contradictory to state the principles of Hua-Yen and then analyse each one as though each principle exhibits a fixed form as this would evoke the idea of eternalism, which is not accepted in Hua-Yen (Cook, 1977). Added to this, Hua-Yen philosophy advocates that the characteristics of perceived objects are functions of perception and that things are created through the transformation of reality (Cook, 1977:53). Thus, one’s reality is based on their perception, which is a function of their neurology which is dependent on their lived experience. As each person lives a unique life, there exist multiverse as apposed to a *universe*. Thus, the author is aware that any attempt to distinguish the philosophy of the Hua-Yen epistemology is but one of infinitely many possible explanations.

It might be more fitting to experience the Hua-Yen life rather than to postulate an intellectual argument. To get as close to experience as possible within a written document, it was decided to follow in the master’s steps and use questions as tools to discuss the Hua-Yen epistemology as was done by Fa-tsang himself. A key feature of Hua-Yen is the relational aspects of life and the universe. Thus the topics chosen were used to highlight the relational connectedness of the subject matter.

Delineating our World

From childhood, one is taught names of items in our environment. A parent points to a light and says to their young child “light”. This continues until the child can name and isolate parts from his/her world. Survival would be difficult if one could not name the daily items that are used. Thus we are taught to see difference and research has shown that our brains respond to difference faster than non-difference (Bateson, 1972). The self is known as being apart from the environment and slowly a child recognises him/herself as having his/her own identity.

We experience that action generates a re-action and find that Newton’s third law is correct and that science must have truth. Thus, when I energise a switch the light comes on and I have effectively caused the light to shine. Much of science obeys the positivistic tradition which advocates linearity and cause effect relationships that can be

repeated and documented objectively. Thus, heated water turns to steam and therefore heat causes water to boil and turns it into vapour.

The mainstream psychology school relying on Freud, Jung and Rogers focuses on the individual in the therapy process. The client presents him/herself for treatment and requires the expertise of the psychologist to facilitate with creating a positive change in the client's life. For example, in terms of Freud's work the past is used as a starting point to determine the origin of the unwanted emotions that the client is dealing with.

Is the Map the Territory?

The parent says "say dada". The child conceptualises the world through the use of the names given to him/her and the perceptual apparatus that he/she has. An impression of the world is generated through lived experience. Thus the concept of a dad becomes present in the child. What is a dad? Is this a fixed identity? According to many dictionaries the answer would be affirmative as the word dad has certain criteria that need to be met before the word can be used. This is fair as language assists in its ability to provide an agreeable platform for people to interface with each other. However, if one asks random people in the street to explain the term dad, there would be many different answers. As the word dad generally represents an agreed combination of criteria, a more creative method would be to ask the people to draw a dad, or what comes to mind when one says dad. The artworks would be different, even for people who come from the same family. Why would there be difference for a single identity? One answer is that each person has had a different lived experience and thus their ideas and beliefs of what a dad is, would differ. Thus, while the term dad (map) is common, it may not represent the territory. Further, the term dad relies on their being children. Dad exists because of its characteristic conceptual describers yet is empty as it cannot have self-existence. To be a dad, one needs to have or take care of children for example, yet one cannot be a dad if there are no children. The identity of dad is relational in nature. The identity of the concept dad is imbedded in its description. Cook (1977) gives an example of ten coins. He shows that each coin is necessary for the other nine to have their identity.

The self arises out of difference and continues to see difference while being the self. As the self's conceptual identity is understood in terms of being interrelated and connected to all the items of difference, the self begins to dissolve. However, awareness of self arose out from a position of no difference which is paradoxical in nature. Cook (1977:53) highlights T'an hsuan chi's statement that discrimination is a function of consciousness.

A stereotyped example of awareness follows:

A medical doctor and a structural engineer walk into a building. The doctor sees walls and ceilings, while the engineer sees the strength of materials, walls, ceilings, pipes, their finishings and possibly the architectural method used in the design. The engineer could not always see the parts until awareness was created of the inner workings and relationships between the materials. However, the engineer knows the parts to be collectively called a building.

The Matrix

Earlier I switched on the light. Was I the cause of this newly shining light? Hua-Yen philosophy highlights that a cause may produce an effect which itself becomes the cause of for another effect. While a person may observe a simple cause effect relationship such as if one switches on the light and then the connected globe emits brightness, however this is only a view of a partial arc of the larger arc. Does the person cause the light to go on or does the electric current now flowing cause the light be visible, or is it the nature of the globe that emits photons when electrons pass through it? Maybe the control engineer sitting on her twelve-hour shift at Eskom's control centre believes that she is the cause as she is allowing that energised circuit to remain on. The answer to what is the cause suddenly has many parts to it. Recognition of the whole requires an acknowledgement of the degree to which we are but a small part of that whole (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Nothing exists by itself alone, which is the realisation of emptiness. Both non-living items and living beings are defined by and connected to other beings and items, which challenges the commonly held action of seeing differences and individuality. Past connects with present, people to people/animals, thoughts to experience, action to re-action both biologically and spiritually. Is there such a thing as a linear cause effect relationship? Yes there is. I may be the cause for the light going on, however I may be part of infinitely many causes and thus the confidence of me being the single cause is removed.

The term equipotentiality can be applied at this juncture. The term describes an idea that there may be many starting points that have the same ending point. Thus, the light may be caused by me, and may be caused by the nature of current flow through tungsten filament and even by the sun's warm rays. The options become countless and creative, for example, the sun's rays facilitate in evaporation which is required for rain which is required for waterfalls, which can be used for hydroelectric turbines that generate electricity in the *Vanderkloof* hydro plant. Where is the origin of the cause?

The origin becomes less important and the relationship takes centre stage. Cook (1977:12) states that the function of Hua-Yen philosophy is to destroy the idea of there being a single cause. Cook (1977) further states:

The cause, then, in its identity with other causes, is able to create the result totally out of its ability to be a cause, and as such does not differ from any other cause. This same *dharma* also has a different essence because of its particular form and essence; as such, it is not able to create the result without the aid of other exterior conditions working in cooperation with it. "Different essence," in fact, means that it requires the help of these conditions. (p.67)

This is a tricky point. For example, a person who is depressed may believe it to be caused by a recent traumatic encounter, say a car accident. A therapist may work with the client through the depression and uncover the causes. If equipotentiality is applied, the causes become less important. New schools of psychology have been found, with one such school termed ecosystemic.

Ecosystemic psychology has gained many lessons from the Buddhist way, in particular the circularity of cause effect relationships. Revisiting Freud's psychoanalytical (individual) psychology, he believed there to be a specific cause for later psychological problems. For example, a trauma during the oral stage (birth to about 18 months of age) of a child's development may lead to later dependence or narcissism (Meyer, Moore and Viljoen, 2003:73). However, the ecosystemic approach differs considerably from that. For example, in the ecosystemic approach, a person who is struggling with an emotional dependence problem would not be told to find a cause for their problem. The cause would be unimportant as it tends to uncover the "why" of the situation. As any cause is just as plausible as the next, and with each consisting of numerous supporting parts as highlighted by Cook, the therapy process would be life-long as uncovering the *correct* cause may prove to be impossible. Many people have experienced the situation whereby they are certain they have uncovered the root source and they feel better only later to awaken to the new "real" cause. This may continue for some time and a pattern may be noticed with new better causes constantly arising. Thus the ecosystemic approach would focus on the "how" rather than the "why". Awareness of the Hua-Yen principle of causality humbles the specialist as their ability to diagnose pathology and locate the problem source in their clients is somewhat reduced, thus they cannot advocate superior knowledge. This is a key feature which was derived from Hua-Yen.

Generally, when one visits a doctor one inherently is looking for a label. One requires the label in order for diagnosis and treatment, the label provider/doctor is in a knowing position and thus has superior knowledge to the patient/label-shopper or else the patient would not see that doctor. Thus, in terms of psychology, the specialist Freudian psychologist has superior knowledge and the same applies. However, the ecosystemic

therapist cannot have superior knowledge as she is aware of infinite causality and equipotentiality and thus has a “not-knowing” stance (Anderson, & Goolishian, 1992). When one realises that they do not know the answers to other people’s problems then humility and compassion prevail. Equality is integral in this relationship which has benefited the ecosystemic psychologies well and challenged the mainstream Western psychologists numerous times. This principle is not only specific to therapist-client relationships and is true for all relationships. Thus, when one sees the common site of a homeless person begging on the side of the road, one may have certain stereotypes as to why this person is in that position. Through the Hua-Yen understanding and experience of causality one can have a clearer less judgemental picture and have humility. Cook (1977:88) terms this self-transcendence and describes it as a lack of pride and egotism. This may not be that challenging as it is easy to feel humbled by a homeless person; however would the same apply to the criminal who has murdered a handful of innocent people. Can we be compassionate? This is not as easy.

There are programs that deal with the rehabilitation of prisoners in South Africa. One such program is run by a non-governmental organisation called *Khulisa*. The results are favourable and hardened criminals can be rehabilitated. However, approaching the criminal with a stance of arrogance and judgement has proved to be ineffective. One needs to see this person as an equal before change may take place. Fa-tsang talks about the relationship between true and falseness. Can they both be present at the same time? Can something be both good and bad?

The idea of pathology is related to a framework which in turn is espoused from culture and society. A person’s worldview is mirrored in their use and type of language. Becvar and Becvar (2006), define a conceptual framework as a worldview, or a set of assumptions about the world according to which similarities and/or differences are noticed. If pathology is defined as pathology from one’s conceptual framework, this framework also influences ways of dealing with the pathology and logical solutions are limited to those consistent with that framework. From a different frame of reference, the original pathology from the first framework may no longer be pathological anymore. Thus, it is important to reiterate that the labels “healthy” and “dysfunctional” or “right” and “wrong” are attributions that are made consistent with one’s personal values and those of the society in which one lives. In a similar way, the experience of a problem only exists relative to a given framework of reasoning.

Relationship and Interconnectedness

Fa-tsang uses a rafter and a building walk-through example illustrating the principle of identity, interconnectedness and recursion. The key feature is the recursive nature between the rafter (part) and the complete structure including the rafter. He talks about power, lack of power and causal power. While an item may contain power as a cause, it was the result of another cause and thus lacked power in terms of that relationship. Thus, no item has eternal power and the reverse is also true with no item never having any power, as they represent the extremes while Buddhism advocates the middle path. Bateson (1972) provides an interesting perspective to Fa-tseng's reasoning. Bateson says that both power and control are fictional. There is compliance which masks itself as power. For example, a sadist and a masochist require each other for the definition to be upheld, that is, the masochist requires someone to inflict them with pain and the sadist requires a person who allows pain to be inflicted onto them. Seen individually, there is no sadist nor masochist. Only together can there be a sadist and masochistic system. Thus, without each one complying with each other, there is no relationship of sadism and masochism. Similarly, a dictator of a country requires the inhabitants to comply with the dictating. If everyone in Zimbabwe suddenly turned against Mugabe then he would just be an older gentleman who lives in Zimbabwe. An unlikely situation but the point remains. How can someone be a hijacker, or a dictator if one is alone on an island. There needs to be compliance/cooperation between the relational elements. Thus, is there such a thing as power? Does a slave have no power? For example in Hegel's (1998) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he shows how the master and the slave are both required for each to individuality exist.

A lesser known fact is that South Africa's electrical grid (complete set of power stations, transmission lines and substations - Eskom's grid) is completely interconnected to form a system. The system has many parts which too can be seen as a sub-system with many sub-parts. For example, the complete grid consists of 22 power stations which can be seen as the generation system. However each power station can also be seen as a system. Each generator within the power station is also a system and so on.

Koeberg nuclear power station consists of two uranium pressurised reactors that convert nuclear energy to electrical energy. Common control systems rely on feedback setups. Here the output is fed back into the system where corrections can be applied when the output deviates. With respect to nuclear power, a feed-forward layout is used. Here, slight perturbances are actually intentionally initiated into the system and if the result is what was predicted then all is well. If not then fast action needs to be taken. If

a feedback method was used, the output deviation may change too fast for the system to correct and an uncontrolled nuclear explosion could take place¹. Thus, extremely small changes in the nuclear control system could lead to drastic outcomes. It is interesting to note that there exists a large amount of unpredictability within the control system and thus feed-forward methods are used.

The first functional nuclear reactor was synchronised to join the grid on 4 April 1984 (Eskom, 2009). The generator cannot simply be turned on and added to the system as it would offset the other generators at the other power stations, thus, all generators need to be monitored for frequency, phase and power flow etc. so as to maintain the integrity of the system. If a large uncleared fault occurs on a transmission line say in Gauteng, perturbances could be noticed throughout the system. Thus, in effect a bus driving into a power line in Gauteng could offset a generator over 1000km away. The same is true for a fault occurring at *Koeberg*, the effects of which would be noticed at numerous power stations around the country. Standing next to the generator, one may hear increased vibrational noise owing to a problem anywhere on the entire system. A generator that falls out of step (loses synchronism with the rest of the system) may suddenly absorb huge amounts of power instead of supplying its generation capacity. This acts as a massive load and again the *entire* system's integrity could be affected if left unresolved.

The national control centre has about 10 operators per shift whose job is to maintain the integrity of the system. For example, just to maintain the frequency at 50Hz, a decision and action is taken manually every 5-25seconds by a single operator (Jan Muller, personal communication²). Lazanas (2005) completed his masters thesis on the visualisation of the transmission grid by the operators. He found that the best operators had the ability to "become apart of" the system. When they were asked how they knew what to do in emergency situations, they responded by saying that they had a *feel* for the system. These operators have become so close with the control system that when there was a software change on the computer system, it affected some of them to such a degree that some reported family problems and depression. Subsequently, the software was adjusted to mimic the old interface. Further studies are being conducted on the stress management of the operators and their decision making ability during critical periods. Some operators are successful in making the correct decisions which are not necessarily logically valid. For example, devastating effects have resulted in decisions made which while are textbook correct, have had only negative

¹ Simplistic explanation of feedback and feed-forward.

² Jan Muller is the manager of the national control vicinity at Eskom Simmerpan in Germiston.

consequences in real life. The successful operators cannot explain how they know what to do and it has been postulated that they have an internal visualisation of the entire Eskom grid. They are believed to be able to emotionally feel the weaknesses and problem areas *before* they occur. Intuition and gut feel prevail for many decisions and this ability is unfortunately not teachable and hence the current shortage of such people. From this example, it can be concluded that there is a deep interconnectedness of the electrical equipment as well as the connectedness of the operators to the system. This is but a small example of connectedness in everyday life at Eskom.

The Zen master Xu Yun stated (Abbot, Temple, & Hawaii, nd):

To be empty means to be empty of ego, to be without any thought of self, not in the sense that one functions as a vegetable or a wild animal – living things which merely process water, food and sunlight in order to grow and reproduce – but in the sense that one ceases to gauge the events, the persons, the places, and the things of one's environment in terms of "I", "me" or "mine". A person who is "empty of self" seldom has occasion even to use these pronouns." (p1)

The Part, further Parts and still more Parts.

It was believed that the building blocks of matter were molecules. Later with the help of Neils Bohr the structure of the atom was distinguished and became the smallest division of a chemical element. The atomic structure made sense and many Nobel prizes handed out for work on this topic related to motion, space and charge, electrons, protons and the nucleus. Later, it was found out that there were other atomic parts that were even smaller than the electron. These particles were always there, but were just not seen. The neutrino is a non-charged particle that can move through atomic space relatively easily. For example, it is estimated that more than 50 trillion neutrinos pass through the human body every second (Neutrino, 2009). Every time scientists determine the reality of physics, a short while later it is questionable. The atom and its parts have been generally thought of as matter, however the deeper one looks into this matter, the less *form* is present and more *emptiness* is found. Is there such a thing as matter? Some have answered this in the negative and cited that there is merely information. Thus, within the atom, there is mainly open space, within the core or nucleus of an atom again there is mainly open space. This continues and ideas such as infinite divisibility are being revisited. From a scientific point of view, Nagarjuna and Fa-tsang had insight that is forcing physics to re-assess its deterministic view of physical matter, motion and structure. A new view is that the scientist finds what it is he/she is looking for as he creates his reality as he goes along. This is an esoteric view which

would not usually have a place in physics, however quantum mechanics is quickly making room for the connectedness between the scientist and his subject matter.

Fa-tsang talks of identical essence and different essence (Cook, 1977:63). Things can be both different yet the same. Fa-tsang uses *The Four Domains of Reality* including the *shih* (sense perception) and the *li* (absolute metaphysical reality) to explain this concept (Clasquin, 2004). Moving through the domains, one ends in a position where they no longer talk of the universe as the universe now contains the very speaker.

Conclusion

This subject was challenging to convey. It is like trying to *explain* what its like to be *silent*?

The Hua-Yen philosophy shows that all things lack intrinsic reality, intrinsic objectivity, intrinsic identity or intrinsic referentiality. This does not make things disappear but rather opens up the door to the relative nature of substance and thought. Owing to the non-objective but rather referential view of objects, one can see that this Buddhist philosophy follows a middle path in siding with neither materialism nor nihilism (Śūnyatā. 2008, April 27).

The well known saying from the Heart Sutra, form is emptiness; emptiness is form can be applied to any intellectual reasoning about philosophy. The reasoning may have both form and emptiness and thus these words cannot escape the Hua-Yen principles. When I look around my natural world I see integration. I do not see finite lines, exact sequences, and polar opposites. In fact I only see that in the man made world where buildings, cars, medical tests and engineering exist. In my natural world there exists enmeshment, broken boundaries and patterns that have no explanation other than of itself by itself. However, I would not be able to see a boundary, an enmeshment or understand an explanation unless I lived in a world where these things have been punctuated.

The Hua-Yen epistemology poses numerous challenges to Western society. An unfortunate factor of the Hua-Yen philosophy is its complexity. The ideas and experience presented by Fa-tsang take time to understand. Many people may not actually grasp this philosophy. This philosophy may be met with sharp arguments as it effectively can diffuse many people's beliefs and values.

The equipotentiality principle can be annoying especially in the Western world where the majority of Westerners require information that is delivered in a clear linear manner.

Would you accept your mechanic to tell you that the bill for your car repair is R5000 and his reason is that the sun shines? Would it be acceptable to hear that the person who burgled your house was correct and you are correct too for being upset? Should the police be completely compassionate to criminals during a gun fight? However, it does seem that history has shown that human nature has facilitated horrendous atrocities usually for *individual*/personal gain.

Maybe the Hua-Yen philosophy could be the moderator of our society.

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