THE FLOWER GARLAND SCHOOL

In seventh-century China and the Korean state of Silla, the teachings of the Flower Garland (J: Kegon) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism was a religious accompaniment to the state-building process, and in eighth-century Nara-period Japan, it served the same function. It preached a universal spiritual communion in accordance with the doctrine of interdependent existence and interdependent salvation as the basis for a universal state that would also be a Buddhist land or state.

THE FLOWER GARLAND SŪTRA

The basic scripture of the Flower Garland school is the Flower Garland Sūtra (Kegon-kyō), a lengthy work describing an enormously grand vision of the universe. The language of the sūtra is so mystic and extravagant that it has acquired a reputation for being abstruse and almost impossible to comprehend. Widely regarded in the Mahāyāna tradition as being the first sermon preached by the Buddha, revealing the full content of his enlightenment, this sūtra was said to be too profound and lofty for most humans to understand. Therefore, after making concessions to human limitations, the Buddha preached other sūtras that were easier to grasp.

The Flower Garland Sūtra teaches tenets similar to those developed in other schools and contributes to a doctrinal common ground for Mahāyāna Buddhism in general. The terms “interdependence,” “interpenetration,” “simultaneous co-arising,” and “nonduality” express this basic notion that the diverse elements of the universe are interdependent and interrelated. This is not to say that everything is identical, however; rather, the Kegon vision affirms diversity and attempts to explain the inherent and simultaneous interconnectedness of each thing with all things and all things with each thing, without the loss of individual identities.

The patriarchs of the school in China often enjoyed their rulers’ patronage. Dushun (557–640), the school’s founder, was held in high esteem by Emperor Wen (r. 589–605) of the Sui dynasty, and Fazang (643–712), the third patriarch and great systematizer of Kegon (Ch: Huayan) teachings, was honored several times by Empress Wu (r. 684–704) of the Tang, who supported a new Chinese translation of the Flower Garland Sūtra by Śiksānātha and was acclaimed by Huayan monks as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Maitreya.

THE FLOWER GARLAND SŪTRA: THE TOWER OF VAIROCHANA

The last section of the sūtra tells of the pilgrimage of Sudhana, a youth who visits various people, each of whom teaches him something about the Flower Garland universe. Maitreya welcomed Sudhana by showing him the great tower of Vairochana, the central Buddha of the sūtra. The tower was a place in which the interconnectedness of the universe could be seen and is described in the following excerpt taken from Śiksānātha’s translation.

In the Kegon view, a Buddhist state (bukkoku) would be one that supported this universal spiritual communion. However, as a universal principle underlying a universal state—the mutual fusion and permeability of all things—even while acting as a solvent of all local loyalties and cultural particularism, it also left questions as to the solid ground on which one might erect any social or political structure or ethic. In effect, this left room for the persistence of strong indigenous customs, thus enabling egalitarian spirituality to coexist with political and social hierarchy.

This is the place where all the buddhas live peacefully. This is the dwelling place where a single eon permeates all eons and all eons permeate one eon without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one land permeates all lands and all lands permeate one land without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one sentient being permeates all sentient beings and all sentient beings permeate one sentient being without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one buddha permeates all buddhas and all buddhas permeate one buddha without loss of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where in a single moment of thought everything about the past, present, and future can be known. This is the dwelling place where in a single moment of thought one can travel to all countries. This is the dwelling place where all sentient beings manifest all of their prior lives. This is the dwelling place of concern for the benefit of everyone in the world. This is the dwelling place of those who can go everywhere. This is the dwelling place of those who are detached from the world and yet constantly remain there to teach other people.

[Kegonkyō, TD 10, no. 279.423; GT]

5. Actually, Empress Wu assumed the title of emperor, the only woman in Chinese history to have done so, and adopted the dynastic name of Zhou, rather than Tang, during her period of personal ascendancy.
THE BUDDHA KINGDOM OF THE FLOWER GARLAND

A common refrain in Kegon Buddhism is the claim that the perfect realm of the Buddha (ni) is interfused with the ordinary world (ji) without obstruction (mu-gu) and that earthly rulers should manifest this universal harmony and order by "turning the wheel of the dharma" throughout the land. With its vivid descriptions of this unity of all parts within a whole, the Flower Garland Sutra articulated a spiritual ideal that easily resonated with political objectives for unification and stability. In other East Asian countries as well, the Kegon ideal of harmony inspired the building of the Bulguksa (Temple of the Kingdom of the Buddha), which commemorated the unified rule of the Korean kingdom of Silla, and the establishment of the Great Temple of the East (Tōdaiji) in Nara, which exemplified Emperor Shōmu's (r. 724-49) vision of centralized rule in Japan.

Chapter on the Exquisite Adornments of the Rulers of the World

All of the kingdoms in the ten directions
Will become purified and beautiful in a single moment
When rulers turn the wheel of the dharma
With the wondrous sounds of their voices
Reaching everywhere throughout their lands
With no place untouched.

The world of the Buddha is without bounds,
And his dharma realm inundates everything in an instant.
In every speck of dust the Buddha establishes a place of practice,
Where he enlightens every being and displays spiritual wonders.
The World Honored One practiced all spiritual disciplines
While coursing through a past of a hundred thousand eons,
Adorning all of the lands of the buddhas,
And manifesting himself without obstruction, as if in empty space.

The Buddha’s divine powers are unbounded,
Filling endless eons;
No one would tire of constantly watching him
Even for countless ages.

You should observe the realms of the Buddha’s power
Purifying and adorning all of the countries in the ten directions.
In all these places he manifests himself in myriad forms,
Never the same from moment to moment.

Observe the Buddha for a hundred thousand countless eons,
But you will not discern a single hair on his body,
For through the unhindered use of skillful means
It is his radiance that shines on inconceivably numerous worlds.

In past ages the Buddha was in the world
Serving in a boundless ocean of all the buddhas.
All beings therefore came to make offerings to the World-Honored One,
Just as rivers flow to the sea.

The Buddha appears everywhere in the ten directions,
And in the countless lands of every speck of dust
Wherein are infinite realities
The Buddha abides in all, infinitely unbounded.

The Buddha in the past cultivated an ocean
Of unbounded compassion for sentient beings,
Whom he instructed and purified
As they entered life and death.

The Buddha lives in the dharma realm complex of truth
Free of forms, signs, and all defilements.
When people contemplate and see his many different bodies.
All their troubles and sufferings disappear.

STATE SPONSORSHIP AND CONTROL OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism’s early claim to exist beyond the authority of the state, as asserted by Huiyuan in fifth-century China, was radically transformed in the Tang period when it became an institutional arm of the state. The office of the “superintendent of the Buddhist clergy (sangha),” which first appeared under the Northern Wei in the mid-fifth century, marked the inception of this transformation. The superintendent headed a bureaucracy staffed by lay officials or nominal “monks” charged with overseeing monastic affairs. He was not the head of an autonomous religious organization but, rather, an appointee of the emperor and given tonsure by the emperor’s hand.

The religious rationale for this government-run Buddhism in China was supplied by the first superintendent, Faguo, who justified the monks’ service to the government by directly identifying the emperor as the Buddha. In contrast to Huiyuan’s rigorous defense of clerical independence, Faguo said that “Taizu