All is One

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One of the most beautiful metaphors in Buddhism, and a central image of Hua-yen (Jap. Kegon) Buddhism is the Net of Indra: an infinitude of jewels, each jewel reflecting each other, reflecting each other, reflecting each other… The jewels are elements of the phenomenal world, and the metaphor illustrates how every element “interprets” every other. But what does this metaphor mean?

Both Fa-Tsang, the effective founder of Hua-yen Buddhism, and modern commentators such as F. H. Cook, tend to cash out the metaphor by saying that all things are one, that a rafter of a house is identical with the whole house. This apparently paradoxical claim is even harder to understand. Are we to suppose that the rafter and the house are literally identical – that everything true of one is true of the other?

In this paper I will provide an account of what all these things mean. The key to the problem is a certain understanding of the notion of emptiness. I will provide a graphical representation of this, which makes clear in what sense the rafter and the house are the same, and delivers a striking visual representation of the interpenetration of the Net of Indra.