

after 1340 as stūpas became the religious and ceremonial centers of monasteries.

The most important temple remains that reflect the development of Sukhothai architecture are at Wat Mahathat (Monastery of the Great Relic), located in the center of the city. Wat Mahathat was built during King Ramkhamhaeng's reign (ca. 1279–1298) and was renovated around 1340 during the reign of the pious King Loëthai (1298–1346/7). Many forms of stūpas can still be seen (Khmer-tower, lotus-bud, and bell-shaped types), as well as the ruins of the congregational hall (*ubosot* or *bot*) and an assembly hall (*wihan*). A unique Sukhothai-type of stūpa was built on a low pyramidal platform of three levels that supported a staggered shaft that housed the relic. Above it was a smoothly rounded ovoid bulb (lotus-bud stūpa), which would later be crowned with a spire. Eight subsidiary stūpas were linked to the center with connecting walls. The four axial towers built in Khmer style were decorated with stucco designs similar to those on the Lankatilaka Temple in Sri Lanka, dating to 1342. Themes from the historical Buddha's past lives, meant to inspire practitioners, decorated the Mahathat tympana.

Ubosot and *wihan* were commonly built of brick covered with plaster and decorated with stucco. Their roofs were made of wood covered with ceramic tiles; for the most part, only the columns stand today. *Ubosot* can be distinguished from *wihan* by the (typically eight) boundary stones (*sema*) that were generally placed around it.

See also: Ayutthaya; Monastic Architecture; Southeast Asia, Buddhist Art in; Thailand

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SUMERU, MOUNT. See Cosmology

ŚŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS)

Within the nature of reality in MAHĀYĀNA ontology, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) must be realized en route to en-

lightenment. The term *śūnyatā* has been glossed as “openness,” “inconceivability,” or “unlimitedness,” but is best translated as “emptiness” or “voidness.” It refers to what dharmas (elements of reality) really are through what they are not: not as they appear, not conceptualizable, not distinguishable, and, above all, lacking permanent, independent, intrinsic existence.

Although emptiness is sometimes mentioned in non-Mahāyāna texts, where it describes, for example, the contents of an advanced meditative state, the nonexistence of a self, or the absence of defilements in NIRVĀṆA, the PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ LITERATURE of the Mahāyāna brought emptiness to prominence in Buddhist wisdom discourse. In paradoxical rhetoric, these sūtras describe emptiness as the true nature of all entities and concepts, from form through a buddha's awareness; thus, there really is no form, no buddha. This apparently nihilistic claim has been the subject of commentarial exegesis, philosophical disputation, meditative investigation, and ethical reflection throughout the Mahāyāna world. Still, emptiness is simply a radicalization and universalization of the earlier Buddhist idea of no-self (*anātman*), so that the view that there exists no unchanging subsisting person is extended to all possible objects and ideas, whether pure or impure, Buddhist or non-Buddhist—since grasping at true existence in any of them (including emptiness itself) will preclude the uprooting of defilements, hence the attainment of liberation and buddhahood.

In India, the most important philosophical reflection on emptiness emerged from the MADHYAMAKA SCHOOL, beginning with NĀGĀRJUNA (ca. second century C.E.), whose *Madhyamakakārikā* (*Verses on Madhyamaka*) uses reductive reasoning to demonstrate the untenability, hence emptiness, of various key concepts, including causation, time, and nirvāṇa. Nāgārjuna asserts, however, that emptiness is nihilistic only for those who ignore the distinction between two truths: the *ultimate*, in which everything truly lacks intrinsic existence; and the *conventional*, in which, precisely because they are empty (that is, interdependent), things exist and function, and concepts are valid. Subsequent Madhyamaka thinkers extended Nāgārjuna's analysis, reflecting on the implications of emptiness for such issues as the role of rationality on the PATH, the admissibility of syllogistic arguments “proving” emptiness, the “truth” value of conventional truths, the absoluteness of the negation involved in emptiness, the status of morality and compassion, the content of an awareness realizing emptiness, and the rapidity with which realization of emptiness effects enlightenment.

Other Mahāyānists analyzed emptiness, too. YOGĀCĀRA SCHOOL writers agreed on its ultimacy, but described it as the absence of concepts in perfected awareness, or as an external object's inseparability from the consciousness perceiving it. Texts on TATHĀGATA-GARBHA (buddha-nature) sometimes implied that emptiness is different on different levels: Saṃsāric phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence, but buddha-awareness is empty of saṃsāric phenomena, itself being pure, permanent gnosis. In Tibet, these ideas were described as the *intrinsic emptiness* and *extrinsic emptiness* views, respectively. The HUAYAN JING (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra*; *Flower Garland Sūtra*) and East Asian schools based upon it, such as the Huayan school, portrayed emptiness as the perfect interpenetration of all phenomena. In tantric traditions, emptiness is the adamant nature of reality, inseparable from a clear, blissful gnostic awareness; worlds and beings, MAṆḌALAS and deities, arise from and return to it, in reality as in meditative practice.

Discourse about emptiness was central to scholastic and meditative traditions in Tibet. It was also central to the philosophical treatises of the Sanlun, Huayan, and Tiantai schools of China, Korea, and Japan, and to the texts and praxis of East Asian Chan. Contemporary Buddhists, both Asian and Western, continue to explore the philosophical and practical implications of emptiness, reexamining traditional explanations of it, while aligning it with modern scientific and philosophical concepts, such as relativity, ecology, and deconstruction.

See also: Anātman/Ātman (No-Self/Self); Chan School; Huayan School; Philosophy; Prajña (Wisdom); Tantra; Tiantai School

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SŪTRA

The Sanskrit word *sūtra* (Pāli, *sutta*), or “discourse,” is the name generally given to any text said to contain the words or the teaching of the Buddha. Whether or not it actually does is another matter; many sūtras clearly postdate the Buddha's time. Typically, a sūtra begins with the phrase “Thus have I heard,” which is presumed by tradition to be the words of the Buddha's attendant ĀNANDA repeating at the First Council what he heard the Buddha say at a given time and place. The *sūtra-piṭaka* (basket of discourses) represents one of three major divisions of the Buddhist CANON (Tripiṭaka), the others being the VINAYA and the ABHIDHARMA.

See also: Āgama/Nikāya; Councils, Buddhist; Scripture

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SŪTRA ILLUSTRATIONS

Sūtras were illustrated in many different formats and media, such as BIANXIANG (TRANSFORMATION TABLEAUX), but this entry is limited to manuscript illuminations and illustrations done primarily on palm leaf or paper.

Sūtra illustrations in South and Southeast Asia

In South and Southeast Asia the oral transmission of sūtras prevailed until the first century B.C.E. when written copies were first produced. By the tenth and eleventh centuries written sūtras were common and monastic complexes such as Nalanda produced illustrated texts. Sūtras were copied onto leaves of the tala or palmyra tree, the oldest extant example being one brought from China to Japan in 608. The palm leaves are approximately three to four inches wide by twelve to eighteen inches long. The text was written on both sides of the palm leaves, which were lacquered or prepared with pigments before the inscription of the texts. Strung together, the palm leaves were bound between covers of narrow boards upon which illustrations and decorative motifs were also drawn. Illustrated sūtras were also executed on paper that was cut, strung, and bound in the shape and style of palm-leaf sūtras.

The illustrations on these manuscripts were placed in single frames between lines of text or on the covers. Common subjects included individual deities and the