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**Semantic Similarities and Differences  
of *kong* 空, *ti* 體, and *li* 理**

***A Case Study of the Treatise on Eighteen Kinds of Emptiness  
(Shiba kong lun 十八空論)***

**Abstract**

This paper investigates the semantic similarities and differences between the notions of *kong* 空, *ti* 體, and *li* 理 in the *Treatise on Eighteen Kinds of Emptiness* (*Shiba kong lun* 十八空論). The treatise is arguably authored by Paramārtha (Zhendi 真諦; 499–569), one of the most prominent translators and exegetes in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. This treatise is suitable for an investigation of the semantics of the above-mentioned terms, since it aims to explain Indic Buddhist concepts for a Chinese audience. This explanation is conducted by employing both Indian and Chinese concepts, such as persons-and-*dharma*s (Skt. \**pudgala-dharma*; Ch. *renfa* 人法) and the principle of the *dao* (*daoli* 道理). The explanation of various kinds of emptiness is presented through the Chinese hermeneutical framework of essence (*ti* 體) and function (*yong* 用) and altogether serves as a great example of how Indian Buddhist ideas were introduced into the Chinese philosophical landscape. An exegesis on the three terms conducted in the treatise provides readers with a highly nuanced and multi-layered picture of emptiness charged with both ontological and epistemological significance. In addition, the analysis on various aspects of emptiness is deeply connected to the Buddhist soteriological goal of *nirvāṇa*.

**Keywords:** *kong* 空, *ti* 體, *li* 理, *Treatise on Eighteen Kinds of Emptiness*, *Shiba kong lun* 十八空論, Paramārtha, *pudgala-dharma*, *daoli* 道理, *yong* 用

**Introduction**

This paper is a case study on the semantic similarities and differences between the notions of *kong* 空, *ti* 體, and *li* 理 in the *Treatise on Eighteen Kinds of Emptiness* (*Shiba kong lun* 十八空論; from here on SBKL).<sup>1</sup> While all three

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<sup>1</sup> This study relies on the recension found in the Taisho Canon (*Dazheng zang* 大正藏, 1616.31.861–7). Supplemented by the reading recensions found in The Rock-Cut Canon of Fang Shan (*Fang shan shijing* 房山石經 19冊726番9) and in the Goryeo Canon (*Gaoli dazangjing* 高麗大藏經 16冊580番).

words can have varied meanings in Chinese literature, in Buddhist literature these notions most often appear as technical terms. *Kong* (Sanskrit: *sūnyatā*) is commonly translated as ‘emptiness’, and is one of the central concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Among many other interpretations, *kong* often denotes something being empty of its own intrinsic nature or denotes emptiness in general.

*Ti* is a native Chinese concept and is commonly rendered as ‘essence’ or ‘substance of things’. *Li* is another important Chinese term mostly having the connotations of ‘ontological or ethical principle’ or ‘the makeup of reality’. The meaning is highly dependent on the tradition and time period in which it appears. As these most common translations might imply, depending on the context, the three terms can have much in common and thus can cause difficulties for a reader of Buddhist texts.

For such an investigation into the semantics of the above-mentioned terms, SBKL is very suitable, as the apparent aim of the text is to explain Indic Buddhist concepts for a Chinese audience. This explanation is conducted by employing both Indian and Chinese concepts, such persons-and-*dharmas* (*renfa* 人法; \**pudgala-dharma*)<sup>2</sup> and the principle of *dao* (*daoli* 道理). It is even more fascinating that this explanation of various kinds of emptiness is presented through a Chinese hermeneutical framework of essence (*ti* 體) and function (*yong* 用).

Traditionally, SBKL was believed to be a composition of an Indian author and translated by Paramārtha (Zhendi 真諦; 499–569 BCE). Modern scholarship, however, suggests that rather than being a translation, the text was composed by Paramārtha or his circle.<sup>3</sup> Paramārtha was an Indian monk and one of the most prolific and prominent translators in the history of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> His life in China was marked by numerous difficulties, including a lack of patronage and general turbulence in the region,<sup>5</sup> which meant that he often had to move from place to place. This resulted in significant issues in differentiating his translations from his original works, as well as numerous falsely attributed ‘translations’, of which the most famous is *The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論).<sup>6</sup> Paramārtha can also be considered one of the main disseminators of Yogācāra ideas in China, as he is responsible for introducing and translating some of the key texts of the Indian Yogācāra tradition, such as Compendium of the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in this text *ren* (\**pudgala*) refers to physical and mental elements, which according to Buddhist tradition, constitutes an individual. *Dharmas* refer to all phenomena exterior to the said individual or the world.

<sup>3</sup> Radich 2012: 65.

<sup>4</sup> For the list of texts attributed to Paramārtha see Keng – Radich 2019: 753–754.

<sup>5</sup> For the study on Paramārtha’s turbulent life in China see Paul 1982: 42–62.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of Paramārtha’s literary corpus see Radich 2012.

Mahayana (*Mahāyāna-saṃgraha-sāstra*; *She dasheng lun* 攝大乘論, abbr. *Shelun* 攝論), which led to the formation of an exegetical tradition by the same name.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of emptiness is elaborately presented in SKBL, and in the light of the exegesis, definitions of *ti* and *li* are postulated as well. The main purpose of the text is to elucidate on the emptiness of persons-and-*dharmas* (*renfa* 人法), namely, the entirety of phenomena (with a special emphasis on persons) as lacking intrinsic essence or literally ‘self’ (*renfa er wuwo* 人法二無我). This lack of intrinsic self is precisely a characteristic that is shared between all phenomena (*yiqiefa tongxiang* 一切法通相). Besides providing a point-by-point description of what kind of phenomenon is empty of intrinsic existence, and providing an exegesis on how it is empty, the text also contains numerous side ventures undertaken by the author in the form of answering the questions invoked by an interlocutor, such as a lengthy exegesis on Buddha-nature. Overall, the text should be taken rather as pedagogical in nature, and therefore it is useful precisely in its attempt to define the concepts for the audience.

### Emptiness in the Mahayana Tradition

The main focus of SKBL is the concept of emptiness. Since it is the main semantic content of the three terms in question, it is necessary to provide it with a very succinct definition. In Mahayana Buddhism, the term emptiness most often denotes the fact that any kind of phenomenon is empty of intrinsic nature, meaning that it does not have inherent existence or essence and is rather a product of various conditions. Thus, it not enough to say that a phenomenon is empty; it is more prudent to say that it is ‘empty of intrinsic nature’. Jay Garfield elaborated on this point by saying that something lacking essence means that it does not exist ‘from its own side’.<sup>8</sup>

The postulation of the idea of emptiness is an attempt by Buddhists to describe the middle-way (*Madhyamāpratipada*; *zhongdao* 中道, *zhongguan* 中觀) between the two extremes – phenomena as existing (*you* 有) and phenomena as non-existing (*wu* 無), often referred to as positions of essentialism and nihilism, respectively. The middle-way maintains a claim that phenomena arise dependently, and it is thus not correct to state that they are either existing or non-existing. The two main exegetical traditions dealing with the idea of emptiness, inherited by Chinese from India, are those of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

For Yogācāra, emptiness is equated with reality, which is the object of cognition of the transcendent mind and consciousness in its non-dual and

<sup>7</sup> Hamar 2017: 77.

<sup>8</sup> Garfield (trans.) 1995: 89.

non-conceptual natural state. Vasubandhu (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century CE), one of the founders of the Yogācāra school of thought, takes phenomena as empty of intrinsic-nature, which is imagined and expressible, but not empty of ineffable intrinsic-nature. The Yogācāra view thus claims existence to be ineffable, and in such a way, emptiness appears to exist.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Yogācāra reduces all existents to be mental, while their truly existing referent is the momentary flow of consciousness.

The Madhyamaka view, generally speaking, is that even the flow of mind lacks fundamental status,<sup>10</sup> and the only existence is ‘conventional designations’. In other words, any point of reference, such as existence or non-existence, is merely imagined and not applicable when reality is discussed.<sup>11</sup>

It could be said that the Madhyamaka tradition of interpretation seeks to undermine metaphysical claims that attempt to describe reality as existing or non-existing. Yogācāra, in turn, avoids this seemingly strong ontological commitment by establishing its famous claim of ‘consciousness-only’ (*Vijñaptimātra*; *wei shi* 唯識).<sup>12</sup> This term can have a number of interpretations, but in the case of SBKL, I would like to follow Dan Lusthaus, who suggests treating consciousness-only ‘as an epistemic caution, not an ontological pronouncement’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is possible to talk about things only from the point of experience, and experience itself is inseparable from consciousness or cognition.

As we will see, the position taken in SBKL is rather the one described by Vasubandhu, as consciousness-only being an important constituent in the author’s presentation of emptiness. However, the text presents the reader with many nuances about what emptiness precisely means, and it is necessary to provide various contexts in which the term is being used throughout the text.

### Emptiness in SBKL

The term *kong* in SBKL is sometimes used grammatically as an adjective meaning ‘empty’, but most often it is a noun meaning ‘emptiness’. When *kong* is employed as an adjective, the object that is described as ‘empty’ is always *dharmas* (*fa* 法; which I chose to render as phenomena). When it is used as a noun, *kong* indicates the state of *dharmas* as being empty. The argumentation by which any kind of phenomena are deemed to be empty is precisely what defines

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<sup>9</sup> Salvini 2015: 60–62.

<sup>10</sup> Garfield – Westerhoff 2015: 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Salvini 2015: 60–62.

<sup>12</sup> Also sometimes translated as perception-only or cognition-only.

<sup>13</sup> Lusthaus 2002: 6.

the semantic range of the term emptiness itself. Below are passages postulating emptiness in SKBL.

From the outset, SBKL is concerned with providing evidence that constituents of the process of experiencing, namely subject, object, and cognition, are all inter-reliant on each other.

Emptiness of the Internal is also called Emptiness of the Experiencer. Ordinary people and the followers of the two vehicles<sup>14</sup> say that the six sense bases constitute the experiencer, because karmic fruition is received through [the interaction] with the six sense objects. But this only explains [the functioning] of the six sense faculties. Since there is no grasper, there is also no grasping, and that is why it is said that the experiencer is empty.

內空，亦名受者空。凡夫二乘，謂六入為受者，以能受六塵果報故。今明但有六根。無有能執，以無執故言受者空也。<sup>15</sup>

This passage argues for the fact that although the organs of experience (i.e., the five sense faculties and the mind) constitute the subject, the subject itself is not found apart from the five sense faculties and the mind. This lack of independent subject is what SKBL takes as the emptiness of the subject. The first semantic association of *kong* is experiencer (or an individual) being empty of independent subject or self. This type of emptiness invokes the traditional Buddhist postulation of *anātman* (*wuwo* 無我), the claim that a permanent, unchanging ‘self’ does not exist. A subject that is dependent on faculties and is constructed is not strictly denied but rather deemed empty, and in turn affirming or denying the existence of such phenomena is not viable.

This process of emptying and the nuanced usage of the term ‘there is no’ (*wu* 無) can be illustrated with the example of the phrase ‘there is no grasping’ (*wuzhi* 無執). Here the term ‘there is no’ (*wu*) does not indicate a complete absence of the object, in this case ‘grasping’, but rather here and throughout the text, *wu* points to the lack of independent existence. Thus, the term *wu* becomes nearly synonymous with the term emptiness.

Another way of validating phenomena as empty is by invoking the idea of consciousness-only.

<sup>14</sup> Two Vehicles consists of so called *śrāvakas* (*Shengwen* 聲聞; hearers, disciples) commonly understood as followers of the *āgama* and *nikāya* textual traditions and pratyekabuddhas (*bizhifo* 辟支佛; solitary buddhas). In Mahāyāna they are commonly referred as *hīnayāna* (*xiaosheng* 小乘; lower, inferior vehicle).

<sup>15</sup> *Shiba kong lun* 十八空論, T31, no. 1616, p. 861a26–29.

[From the perspective of] consciousness-only, [perceptual] objects do not exist. This is called Emptiness of the External [objects]. Since there are no objects, therefore there is no consciousness either. This is equivalent to the Emptiness of the Internal.

唯識無境，故名外空。以無境故，亦無有識，即是內空。<sup>16</sup>

The idea of consciousness-only is used to argue for the fact that experiential (outside, *wai* 外) objects are fundamentally reliant on one's perception. This reliance translates into an epistemological assertion: outside objects are empty of existence independent from consciousness or cognition.

Another assertion made in this passage follows the logic of a house of cards. Since objects are reliant on cognition, cognition in turn is reliant on objects. This argumentation invokes the image of a structure that can exist in its shape and form only due to the fact that each constituent supports another. By the means of such argumentation, we can see that the emptying of one phenomenon in turn leads to the emptying of another. This argumentation is reminiscent of the logic used by Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE), the main figurehead of the Madhyamaka tradition, in his *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; *Zhong lun* 中論).<sup>17</sup>

Great Emptiness is also called that where the body abides, which is equivalent to the ten directions of the material world which are immeasurable, limitless, and all empty. Therefore, it is called Great Emptiness.

大空，謂身所託<sup>18</sup>，即器世界十方無量無邊，皆悉是空，故名大空。<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b3–5.

<sup>17</sup> One example of such argumentation is the relationship between the subject 'desirous one', and the action 'desire': 'If prior to desire, and without desire there were desirous one, desire would depend on him. Desire would exist when there is desirous one. Were there no desirous one, moreover, where would desire occur? Whether or not desire or the desirous exist, the analysis would be the same. Desire and desirous one cannot arise together. In that case, desire and desirous one would be mutually contingent'. In: Garfield (trans.) 1995: 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Qiantuo* 挈託 appears to be a rather complicated term to translate. It is written in the same way in all three renditions (Taisho, Fangshan, Goreyo). While the second character *tuo* 託 is not infrequent, and generally means 'to bear' or 'to depend on', the character *qian* 挈 seems to be a less popular orthographic variation of another character. Both characters appear together in the canon only several times, and are used only once in a seemingly similar context by the near-contemporary Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE) in his *Notes on Huayan* (*Huayan youyi* 華嚴遊意): 「正法挈託為土也」 T35, no. 1731, p. 4b17. This passage could be read as 'True Dharma supports this earth'. This reading could also be applied in the case of the passage in SBKL, since it is clear that the body is supported or held by the world. This meaning is closely related with the semantic range of *tuo* 託. Determining which more prominent orthographic variant the character *qian* 挈 exactly represents is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>19</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b14–15.

In this passage, the emptiness of the material world is being discussed. Its emptiness is implied by its immeasurability and limitlessness. An object that cannot be measured also cannot be grasped. The passage's terseness suggests that for the author this argumentation was sufficient enough to prove the emptiness of the world.

Emptiness can also be viewed as emptiness in terms of spatiality. Below, the emptiness of temporality is postulated.

Emptiness in terms of non-existence of Anteriority and Posteriority is also called emptiness in terms of non-existence of beginning. It accomplishes benefiting others through the Absolute Emptiness. Absence of anteriority and posteriority is equivalent to non-existence of a beginning and an end. [If] the *bodhisattva* does not comprehend this emptiness, then [the practitioner] will give rise to a fatigued mind, and will abandon the [cycle] of life-and-death. Having seen that the [cycle] of life-and-death is empty, [the *bodhisattva*] then will not differentiate between anterior and posterior, and between a beginning and an end.

無前後空，亦名無始空。為成畢竟空利益他故。不前後即無始終。菩薩若不解其是空，則生疲厭之心捨棄生死。既見生死是空，則不分別前之與後，及以始終。<sup>20</sup>

This passage invites a practitioner to contemplate time as empty for the purposes of alleviating the sufferings of the world. The first clue as to why time should be considered as endless is because phenomena cannot be determined as having either a beginning or an end, since doing so would imply that phenomena are either existing or non-existing. Since this line of reasoning was previously established, the author does not elaborate on the argumentation. The message here is aimed at a practitioner and is soteriological in nature. Emptying time is supposed to relieve one from both the grief of difficulties of the past and worries regarding difficulties of the future. The passage implicitly invites the practitioner to abide to the constant present, which frees one from the above-mentioned vexations and enables one to manifest the *bodhisattva* ideal of constantly or absolutely benefiting sentient beings without exhaustion.

The following passage shows the exegetical ingenuity of the author and is rather significant in repurposing older ideas to fit newer frameworks.

Emptiness of Emptiness. [It] is able to illuminate the characteristics of the real, and it includes four previous kinds of emptiness. Its name is derived from its

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<sup>20</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861c18–21.

object, and [it is also] called Cognition of Emptiness<sup>21</sup>. Cognition of Emptiness is also empty; therefore, it is postulated as Emptiness of Emptiness.

空空。能照真之相。會前四空。從境得名，呼為空智。空智亦空，故立空空。<sup>22</sup>

Here, the concept of emptiness is viewed from a very different perspective compared to the passages discussed before. While previously it was important for the author to show phenomena as being reliant and subjective, here a cognitive mode of experiencing phenomena is being discussed. More precisely, the correct cognition (*zhi* 智) of phenomena is identified as empty. Thus, it is not an emptiness in a proper sense, but rather a cognition of emptiness.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimate Emptiness (*paramārthaśūnyatā*), is also called Emptiness of the Real Object. The practitioner sees internal and external [*dharmas*] as all being empty. Persons-and-*dharmas* do not exist. This object is ultimately real, and is postulated and named the ultimate [truth]. By means of differentiated nature [of phenomena] (*parikalpitasvabhāva*), the [real] nature cannot be attained, [therefore] it is called differentiating nature. Nature being empty is equivalent to the Ultimate Emptiness.

真實空，謂真境空。行者見內外皆空，無人無法。此境真實，立真實名。由分別性，性不可得，名分別性。性空即真實空也。<sup>24</sup>

In this passage the *Yogācāric* definition of the state of emptiness is postulated. First, it is stated that both subject and object (internal and external *dharmas*) are empty. This state of emptiness then is referred to as the ultimately real (*zhenshi* 真實) existence of phenomena. In other words, the emptiness of phenomena here is equated with the true state of phenomena, the phenomenal world, or reality. In Mahayana Buddhist texts reality is most often referred to as suchness (*tathatā*; *zhenru* 真如), a term that is also used in SBKL.

This suchness then needs to be postulated as empty as well. This is done by declaring that by any attempt to perceive this ultimate reality, which is non-dual, the mind engages in the process of differentiating (i.e., labeling, segregating, and conceptually analysing) phenomena. Thus, the non-duality of phenomena is deemed imperceivable by ordinary cognition, which is understood as duality-making or differentiating.

<sup>21</sup> Term wisdom *zhi* 智 should be understood as correct, undistorted cognition.

<sup>22</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b16–17.

<sup>23</sup> The exegetical reasons of this kind of association are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but are a subject for future research.

<sup>24</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b18–20.



The nature (*xing* 性) of phenomena (again, referring to the state of being empty) is beyond conceptualisation, and it is then understood as beyond the reach (*bukede* 不可得) of a conceptual mind. This state of the unattainability or imperceivability of the ultimate existence of phenomenon by the cognition of the perceiver leads to the assertion that the object, ultimate existence, is empty.

Additional clarification is provided in the text by differentiating the types of empty phenomena into two categories: phenomena that are conditioned (*samskrta*; *youwei* 有為, *xing* 行) and phenomena that are unconditioned (*asamskrta*; *wuwei* 無為, *feixing* 非行). Conditioned phenomena, as their name implies, refer to phenomena that are reasoned to be empty by the fact of their being dependent on conditions and being compounded.

Unconditioned phenomena refer to already emptied phenomena, the ultimate reality that is the true and the real phenomena. Thus, SBKL deems both types of phenomena as empty, but while conditioned phenomena are empty by the fact that they are conditioned, unconditioned phenomena are empty by the fact and they are inconceivable to the ordinary mind.

Thus, the following position is reached: the emptiness of phenomena, which is ultimately real, is empty. Arguably, such a position is proposed in order to avoid the pitfalls of existence (which is done by emptying both phenomena and emptiness itself) and non-existence (which is done by claiming that emptiness is real). This latter emptiness of the real existents is what the text refers to as essence (*ti* 體).

### Essence in SBKL

The term ‘essence’ (*ti* 體) is most often presented in a dyad with the term ‘function’ (*yong* 用). Together they serve as one of the most important philosophical categories in all three Chinese religious traditions. Charles Muller argues that the dyad *ti*–*yong* is an archetypal concept, and analogous philosophical categories appear as early as the 5th century BCE in fundamental Chinese texts, including *Liji*, *Yijing*, *Daodejing*, and *Analects*.<sup>25</sup>

The first exegetical application of the dyad is found in the works of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE).<sup>26</sup> Wang Bi was one of the founders of a new exegetical movement named Profound Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學), which greatly influenced the first Chinese Buddhist exegetical traditions during the 4th century CE, known as the Six Houses and Seven Schools (*Liujia qizong* 六家七宗). Many Buddhist intellectuals of the following centuries were deeply steeped in

<sup>25</sup> Muller 2016: 114–115.

<sup>26</sup> Muller 2016: 120.

*Xuanxue*,<sup>27</sup> and it is not surprising that important hermeneutical models found their way into the Buddhist exegesis as well.

Muller argues that in Buddhism this dyad of *ti* and *yong* was one of the essential exegetical approaches by which Indian Buddhism was gradually sinified. Emergent Chinese Buddhist traditions, such as Tiantai and Huayan, applied archetypal models of the *ti-yong* paradigm to such ‘dichotomous’ pairings as emptiness (*kong* 空) and form (*se* 色), principle (*li* 理) and phenomena (*shi* 事), and others. These dyads conjoined in making two aspects of a single phenomenon.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, SKBL also engages in a similar conjoining, and the dyad has significant importance in the exposition of the various types of emptiness. Since SBKL is a lecture type of text aimed at a Chinese audience, it is not surprising that the author chose to apply this hermeneutical approach as the main framework of his exegesis. The application of Chinese concepts and hermeneutical strategies was an approach often employed by not only native Chinese monks but also monks of Indian origin, and the approach was not unique to Paramārtha.<sup>29</sup> Since in this text the author attempts to explain 18 items, it is understandable that such an unwieldy list had to be restructured. The list of 18 kinds of emptiness was narrowed down to 14 (the author claims that the last four are just different ways of expressing the first 14). The remaining 14 were then divided into two categories: essence (emptiness types 1–6) and function (emptiness types 7–14). It can be loosely considered that the category of essence aims to philosophically establish the position of emptiness, while the category of function is intended to advise the practitioner on how the theory should be applied. The pedagogical motive can be glimpsed from the fact that the numbering is also restarted when types of emptiness belonging to the aspect of function are discussed.<sup>30</sup>

The first six types of emptiness of essence can be understood epistemologically:

Furthermore, the first four are [understood] as what is knowable. The fifth is the agent of knowing. The sixth are the characteristics of what is known. The fifth, Emptiness of Cognition, governs the first four objects. The first four objects are empty. The sixth is the real emptiness which governs the fifth, [which is] the cognition, and therefore it is the cognition which establishes emptiness.

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<sup>27</sup> Zürcher 2007: 86–88.

<sup>28</sup> Muller 2016: 116–117.

<sup>29</sup> Funayama 2006: 55.

<sup>30</sup> The list of 18 kinds of emptiness and their descriptions are beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on the various lists of emptiness see: Lamotte (trans.) 1976: 1634–1680.

又前四所知，第五能知，第六所知相貌。第五智空治前四境。四境是空。第六真空治第五智，故智成空。<sup>31</sup>

The text holds that those types of emptiness that are deemed to be under the aspect of essence pertains to: I) the fact that subjects and objects are dependent on conditions; II) the cognitive process of understanding or perceiving the realities of subject and object as empty; and III) the resulting correct cognitive understanding of the empty phenomena, the non-dual reality, or the real emptiness (*zhen kong* 真空). Moreover, SBKL further explains that:

When discussing these six kinds of emptiness, the essence of emptiness is postulated progressively. First [postulated] is the Emptiness of Experiencer. Second is the Emptiness of What is Experienced. Third is the Emptiness of One's Body. Fourth is the Emptiness of the Place Where the Body Abides. Fifth is [Cognition] Capable of Illuminating Emptiness. Sixth is the Emptiness of the Objects that are Contemplated.

此六空辯，空體自成次第。一受者空、二所受空、三自身空、四身所住處空、五能照空、六所觀境空也。<sup>32</sup>

This passage explains that that which is called essence needs to be postulated gradually. It begins with the emptiness of subject and object, followed by the cognitive process of perceiving such emptiness, and culminating with the postulation of an empty phenomena which is inconceivable (*bukede* 不可得), and non-dual (*wuer* 無二) reality (*zhenshi* 真實), which is also called real emptiness (*zhenkong* 真空). This then is what SBKL defines as essence, the position that I previously delineated as ‘emptiness of phenomena, which is ultimately real, is empty’.

While the analysis of the term function (*yong* 用) is beyond the scope of this text, it can be briefly said that it is the aspect of emptiness that manifests (*xian* 顯) as activity. The importance of activities is that they directly influence the soteriological aims of the practitioner and soteriological activities of the realised practitioners (i.e., buddhas). Thus, types of emptiness classified under the aspect of function are concerned with Buddhist practice and the perception of that practice, such as how the practitioner should perceive time – as a beginningless and endless and, thus, as an empty phenomenon. The aim of such contemplations is to undermine the power of mundane phenomena over the practitioner.

<sup>31</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b24–26.

<sup>32</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 861b20–22.

### Principle in SBKL

As was briefly discussed above, according to Muller, the term *li* 理 and its counterpart *shi* 事 can be seen as another variant of the *ti-yong* archetype. The term *li* is no less essential in Chinese thought than the previously discussed *ti*. The concept of *li*, akin to the concept *ti*, also underwent a long process of development both in Buddhist and in non-Buddhist Chinese exegetical and philosophical traditions.<sup>33</sup> The meaning of *li* in Buddhist texts can usually be loosely translated as ‘principle’ or ‘underlying truth’. However, the contents of this phrase can be quite nuanced, as Brook Ziporyn shows in his study<sup>34</sup>, and should be determined in the specific text.

Unlike the two previously discussed terms, *li* does not feature as prominently in SKBL. Moreover, in contrast with *kong* and *ti*, *li* does not have a precise definition, which indicates the author’s expectation that the audience would have been familiar with the term. It is also rarely paired with *shi*, and most often it is presented alone or in a compound *daoli* 道理. *Li* and *daoli* are completely interchangeable variations, and the choice between a single character or the compound seems to be determined by the rhythmic structure of the segment of the text.

It is rather unambiguous that in SBKL *li* and *daoli* indicate an order or principle of things. However, this order of things is always closely connected with emptiness.

Speaking about Emptiness of Non-Existent *Dharmas*, it should be understood as reality which truly exists. This is the principle of the non-existence of persons, and non-existence of *dharmas*. [This reality] excludes deluded attachments of sentient beings.

言無法空者，謂真實有。此無人無法之道理。除眾生妄執。<sup>35</sup>

Here, the compound *daoli* 道理 is equated with existence that is real (*zhenshi you* 真實有), which in turn is the fact that all phenomena are empty. *Daoli* indicates the principle, the order, or the framework of such an arrangement. Hence, while *ti* refers to the truly existing emptiness of a particular phenomenon, *li* refers to the general order of all phenomena. In such a way the connotation of ‘truth’ and ‘principle’ is retained. The semantic content, however, is charged with previously postulated emptiness.

<sup>33</sup> An extensive overview of conceptual history of *li* 理 can be found in Ziporyn 2013: 29–50.

<sup>34</sup> Discussion on development, and various connotations of *li* 理 in Tiantai and Huayan traditions can be found in Ziporyn 2013: 148–223.

<sup>35</sup> *Shiba kong lun*, T31, no. 1616, p. 863a8–9.

It is also important to note that this passage is quite indicative of an epistemological emphasis that is present in the whole exegesis. What is discussed here is the correctly cognised reality and not the ‘deluded attachments of sentient beings’. As such, reality or suchness is an omnipresent affair, yet incorrect cognition is responsible for the distortions experienced by an individual. The correction of this mistake is possible if phenomena are seen as empty in their essence, thus seeing the underlying order of all things. While an ontological premise is inherent in any discussion concerning reality (suchness), the correct cognition of said reality is the main concern of the author of SBKL. This correct cognition is directly related with the soteriological aim of the practitioner, which is again defined through the lens of emptiness.

The eighteenth [type of emptiness] reveals the fruit<sup>36</sup> as empty. This so-called unattainable emptiness explains that this fruit is difficult to attain. Why is it so? Such is the principle of emptiness. It is not ceasing, and it is not permanent, that is why it is called the great permanence. The truth<sup>37</sup> of permanence is equally unattainable, and that is why the truth of cessation is also unattainable. There are no fixed characteristics which could be attained, and that is why it is called difficult to attain.

[It is because] the principle of this emptiness is neither suffering, nor bliss, and that is why it is the great bliss. It is neither self, nor non-self, and that is why it is the great self. It is neither pure, nor impure, and that is why it is the great purity.

第十八出空果。所言不可得空者，明此果難得。何以故？如此空理，非斷非常，而即是大常。常義既不可得故，斷義亦不可得。無有定相可得，故名難得。

此之空理。非苦非樂，而是大樂。非我無我，而是大我。非淨非不淨，而是大淨。

The last of the 18 types of emptiness finalises the whole project of the exegesis on emptiness with the definition of the goal of Buddhist practice itself. The underlying principle of all phenomena is that they are empty. This is the case of liberation, which is empty as well. Liberation, just like reality or suchness, is impossible to grasp with ordinary cognition. The author invites the reader to look beyond the duality-making cognition that sees becoming and ceasing; suffering and bliss; permanence and impermanence; self and non-self; or purity

<sup>36</sup> Fruit denotes the fruit of liberation or *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>37</sup> The term *yi* 義 is notoriously difficult to translate, and depending on context it can mean goal or purpose (*artha*), gist, aspect, among others. In this case I have chosen to render it as ‘truth’; however this still needs to be verified.

and impurity. The mentioned notions of utmost importance in the Buddhist philosophical framework are not discarded, but rather they should be cognised correctly as being empty of intrinsic nature.

### Conclusions

In this study semantic relationships between the terms emptiness (*kong* 空), essence (*ti* 體), and principle (*li* 理) in the *Treatise of the Eighteen Kinds of Emptiness* (*Shiba kong lun* 十八空論) were briefly discussed. As a pedagogically oriented text, SBKL is extremely revealing in its careful exposition of all three concepts.

The text uses emptiness as a philosophical category to demonstrate the lack of substantiality and inherent relativity of phenomena. Moreover, SBKL postulates that subjects, objects, and cognition are all reliant on each other, and in that sense they are empty of substantiality or intrinsic nature. This type of emptiness is also called emptiness of conditioned phenomena.

The second category of emptiness is called true emptiness (*zhen kong* 真空), and it is concerned with the emptied objects themselves. This type of emptiness is equated with correctly perceived reality (*zhenshi* 真實) and is also called emptiness of unconditioned phenomena or emptiness of emptiness.

The concept of essence (*ti* 體) refers to the above-mentioned second type, when a particular phenomenon is discussed. In SBKL the essence of emptiness is semantically equivalent to the reality of phenomenon or true emptiness. The concept of principle (*li* 理, *daoli* 道理) in SBKL also refers to the second type of emptiness, but unlike *ti*, *li* refers to the order or arrangement of the reality or suchness being empty. The three terms *kong*, *ti*, and *li* are deeply tied to the Buddhist soteriological goal of nirvana. Liberation from suffering, according to SBKL, should be achieved through the correct cognition of all phenomena as inherently empty.

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