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Emptiness We Live By: Metaphors and Paradoxes in Buddhism's Heart Sutra

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This paper attempts to delineate the intersection of the Buddhist understanding of mind and cognitive linguistics by exploring conceptual metaphors at both micro and macro levels of the Heart Sutra, a pivotal Buddhist text. Taking a key Buddhist concept, EMPTINESS, to mean transcending the self, Buddhism may be misunderstood as promoting a view of the human mind as disembodied. Micro-level linguistic analysis, however, reveals a paradox between the central message of non-attachment to the body or to the sensations and the pervasiveness of lexical metaphors in the text involving sensori-motor experiences. Investigations of the overarching metaphors and oxymora at the macro-level, such as “FORM IS EMPTY” and “EMPTINESS IS FORM” suggest that Buddhism in fact bears some striking similarities to cognitive philosophy in its recognition of embodiment and categorization as key aspects of mind, whose figurative nature becomes comprehensible through EMPTINESS as a reflection of the dependent nature of all phenomena.

Cognitive linguistics has received considerable attention as an interdisciplinary field producing abundant research in recent years. With the cognitivist approach characteristic of major philosophies around the globe, the ideas of Buddhism are

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also proposed to greatly contribute to the understanding of human cognition (Payne, 2002; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991). This paper aims to further present a dialogue between the Eastern Buddhist mind and the Western cognitive-embodied mind through the investigation of conceptual metaphors at both micro and macro levels of the Heart Sutra, a pivotal Buddhist text.¹

Buddhism, as the major religion in Asia, has profoundly influenced China, India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and many other countries. Along with the Diamond Sutra, the Heart Sutra is the primary representative text of Mahayana Buddhist literature and is greatly renowned both for its brevity and insight, as “the most famous Buddhist scripture” (Lopez, 1988, p. 3). It is viewed as expressing the fundamental ideas of Mahayana Buddhism. The scripture also receives widespread emphasis in the chants of many East Asian Buddhist sects, since it is widely believed that recitation of the text facilitates a spiritual quest for perfect wisdom.

The Heart Sutra directs followers to the way to achieve the perfect state of mind, *nirvana*, by recognizing the essence of life as EMPTY and by discarding surface illusions of false perceptions and concepts. Non-attachment to the body or to sensations and transcendence beyond the self are thus called for to reach the perfect state of mind. Given this message, Buddhism may be misunderstood as promoting a view of the human mind as disembodied, which seems to contradict the views taken by cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whose groundbreaking study set the cornerstone of the second generation of cognitive science, emphasize the significance of bodily experience in human thought and language. Such a cognitive view claims that language and thought are metaphorical in nature, and language reflects embodied experiences via use of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). In a series of related follow-up studies (Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, Lima, & Francozo, 2004; Grady, 1997; Johnson, 1987, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), several key notions of cognitive linguistics have received considerable attention: the importance of human interaction with the environment for conceptual systems and meaning, the role of conceptual metaphors in the way we reason, the tight correlation between sensori-motor schemas and conceptual structures, and the act of categorization as automatic and fundamentally human.

Based on both micro- and macro-analysis of conceptual metaphors in the Heart Sutra, we argue in this paper that the Buddhist philosophy in fact embraces a cognitivist theory of mind. At the micro-level of language analysis, numerous conceptual metaphors involving sensori-motor experiences have been identified in the text. We claim that, despite the advocacy of non-attachment to the body and to the sensations in Heart Sutra, some linguistic uses in this Buddhist scripture are para-

¹There are also conceptual metaphor studies on religious texts, such as Charteris-Black (2004) on the Bible and Koran and Slingerland (2004) on Analects.

doxically grounded in basic embodied experiences. Furthermore, investigations of the overarching metaphors and oxymora at the macro-level, such as “FORM IS EMPTY” and “EMPTINESS IS FORM” suggest that Buddhism in fact bears some striking similarities to cognitive philosophy in its recognition of embodiment and categorization as key aspects of mind.

The core notion of the Sutra is EMPTINESS, or the “dependent nature” of all matter and phenomena (Lopez, 1988, p. 59). Opposed to EMPTINESS, FORM is not simply its opposite, viz. the void, because EMPTINESS represents “the lack of a falsely imagined intrinsic nature in form” (Lopez, 1988, p. 59). The Heart Sutra remarks on the relation between FORM and EMPTINESS as follows:

- (1) “色 不 異 空 空 不 異 色”²
 color/form no different empty empty no different color/form
 “Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form.”
- (2) “色 即 是 空 空 即 是 色”
 color/form is exactly empty empty is exactly color/form
 “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”

Examples (1) and (2) might appear rather opaque to those who are not familiar with Buddhist philosophy: How could “*form be no other than emptiness and emptiness no other than form*”? How could “*form equal emptiness and emptiness equal form*”? We believe that, the key to the puzzle and to the entire scripture, lies in the relation between FORM and EMPTINESS: EMPTINESS represents the ultimate essence of everything perceived, while its counterpart FORM, stands for surface perceptions and conceptions realized via external stimuli. Based on these interpretations, we further claim that in the Heart Sutra’s advocacy of transcendence of sensori-motor inference patterns toward a perfect form of consciousness, *nirvana*, the Buddhist conceptualization of the relation between FORM and EMPTINESS presupposes both the importance of the body and of physical interaction with the environment, as well as the dynamic, context-dependent nature of categorization. We propose that these assumptions correspond to the central beliefs of cognitive science: embodied cognition and categorization. We finally suggest that both Buddhism and cognitive linguistics recognize the limitation of bodily experiences as our inferential reasoning systems, although Buddhism as an ideal religion calls for non-attachment to the body or to sensations and for transcendence of the self in the Heart Sutra.

²The use of *se* “color” to mean FORM is probably a use of metonymy where one property of all materials represents all materials as a generic term.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON BUDDHISM WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

The literature in the field of Buddhist studies is vast in both Mandarin and English, but actually only a few texts are relevant to the cognitive exploration here. Varela et al. (1991) made a groundbreaking attempt to bring together cognitive science and Buddhist meditative psychology. The monograph points out that the critical concept of EMPTINESS “most naturally fits with the logic we have been exploring in the discovery of groundlessness and its relationship to cognitive science” (Varela et al., 1991, p. 221). Payne (2002) likewise suggests possible contributions of Buddhism to cognitive science, mentioning in passing several possible directions for research using a psychological approach to Buddhism, such as the issues of distributed cognition, neuronal plasticity, the role of socialization and enculturation, and so forth. Two pioneer studies, however, mainly address a broad picture in terms of relationships between embodied mind and Buddhism without paying attention to the nitty-gritty data provided by the language of Buddhist texts. Without studying linguistic uses in Buddhist texts, they naturally lose sight of one of its important aspects: metaphor. The present study looks at the Buddhist philosophy of mind from a linguistic angle to investigate conceptual metaphors revealed via a data-driven approach analyzing different levels of language use, taking the most representative Buddhist text as its data.

DATA AND METHODS

The total length of the Heart Sutra is 312 Chinese characters. On account of this terseness, the present study will be qualitative in nature. We use Master Hsuan-Tsang’s translation of the Heart Sutra, basing our English translation on a selected combination of Lopez (1988, 1996), Chao (1995) and Shi (1997). Lopez (1988, 1996) offers one of the most comprehensive linguistic studies on the Heart Sutra in terms of translation and explanation of the text. His explanations are both helpful and comprehensive, so we will rely mostly on them for the English translation and for explanations of important concepts. There are also excellent studies in Chinese that provide in-depth discussion of the fundamental theses in the Heart Sutra (Chao, 1995; Shi, 1997), which we also include among our references. The full text of the Heart Sutra and its English translation is provided in the Appendix.

A convention of notation from cognitive linguistics is followed here according to which concepts and conceptual metaphors are written in capital letters while metaphorical expressions and figurative languages are represented in italicized lower-cases. Therefore EMPTY and EMPTINESS, referring to a notional level entity other than the more literal idea of “empty/emptiness as vacuum”, are both capitalized without quotation marks. When used in contrast to the concept of

EMPTINESS, FORM is also capitalized, otherwise not. It is also noteworthy that EMPTY and EMPTINESS refer to the same concept, but since English makes a strict formal distinction between adjectives and nouns, we have to recruit two derived lexical items for one identical concept.

The method employed to analyze micro-level, i.e., lexical-level, metaphors in the data is based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980, 1999) conceptual metaphor theory, which is grounded in domain incongruity and addresses cross-domain mappings that facilitate an understanding of the target concept in terms of the source concept. Lakoff and Johnson's theory does not help us identify what source domain is involved in motivating a certain linguistic statement, however. We thus also adopt a tool-based approach to attest to the existence of metaphor in the Heart Sutra, using Sinica Corpus, a balanced online corpus of Mandarin Chinese used in Taiwan, available at <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/SinicaCorpus>, and Chinese WordNet, a large lexical database organized by lexical and conceptual-semantic connections at <http://bow.sinica.edu.tw>.

The following steps exhibit how metaphorical usages are identified for analysis: Possible tokens of metaphor use, or polysemy motivated by metaphorical extension, are first manually sorted by native speaker intuition. These candidates are then broken down into morphemes³ and are checked against Sinica Corpus and Chinese WordNet to find whether these lexical items occur in the source domain. Sinica Corpus and Chinese WordNet searches are applied to all tokens to confirm the metaphors identified by our manual search. Consider (3) and (4) for illustration:

(3) “觀 自 在” 菩薩⁴
 look self exist bodhisattva
 “The bodhisattva who *observes and sets him/herself free*”

(4) “照 見” “五蘊 皆 空”
 reflect see five aggregates all empty
 “(S/he) *sees by reflection that the five aggregates are all empty.*”

In previous studies listed in our references, the morpheme 觀 is interpreted as “observe; think over carefully,” and is intuitively a metaphorical usage involving a visual source domain. To attest to the reference to a visual source domain, a search through the Sinica Corpus is carried out. Results indicate that the morpheme is

³Sweester (1990) also discusses morphological and etymological levels of metaphors in the lexicon.

⁴A bodhisattva may take a variety of forms, male or female, old or young. In Mahayana Buddhism, bodhisattva symbolizes mercy and compassion, and anyone can be defined as a bodhisattva as long as s/he vows to help all human beings. As any person pursuing enlightenment may be considered a bodhisattva, the idea of bodhisattva is not limited to one gender or the other. For further explanation, see <http://www.purifymind.com/QuanYin.htm>.

highly productive and often co-occurs with morphemes of the visual domain, as in the cases of 觀鳥 “bird-watching,” 觀景 “sightseeing; viewing the scenery,” and 觀看 “to carefully look at,” etc. In contrast, the collocation with 觀 in (3) is an abstract entity 自在 “freedom” instead of a concrete visible object, thereby meeting the criterion of domain incongruity. A further search through Chinese WordNet generates four meanings for 觀: “look at,” “sight,” “concept,” and “point of view.” Along with the corpus search already done, a comparison between the meanings identifies 觀 as being polysemous, mapping conceptually from the visual domain to the domain of mental activities.

Another example, i.e., the compound 照見 in (4) that appears in the text, can be interpreted as “see by reflection.” Due to its possibility of being exclusive to Buddhism, the compound is however not found in the Sinica Corpus. We then proceed to break the compound apart, searching the corpus for the two morphemes, i.e., search for their repertoires of meaning is also executed to further prove the cross-domain mapping suggested by the compound. The morpheme 見 is found in the corpus to occur frequently in the visual domain, as in 見到 “to see (someone or something),” 見骨 “(of a wound) so deep that the bone is visible,” and 見面 “to meet; to see someone in person.” What follows the morpheme in the text is the proposition “the five aggregates (viz. form, sensation, thought, action, and human awareness) are empty” (viz. form, sensation, thought, action, and human awareness), so a metaphorical projection from a concrete domain of vision to an abstract domain of understanding is at work here.

In addition to lexical level conceptual metaphors, we also identify some macro-level Buddhism-specific language use in the text that is rather opaque. Such language frames the entire discourse and mostly concerns the abstract concept of EMPTINESS. Typical examples are “form is emptiness,” “emptiness is form,” and “the five aggregates are empty.” A search in Chinese WordNet allows us to assign 空 “emptiness” to an abstract domain, and on other hand 色 “color/form” and 蘊 “aggregate” can be considered relatively more concrete. Meeting the criterion of domain incongruity, we claim that EMPTINESS belongs to an abstract domain distinct from FORM or “the five aggregates,” viz. form, sensations, conception, action, and consciousness, so, by this standard, the seemingly opaque figurative phrases involving EMPTINESS may be treated as metaphors.

Aside from metaphors, we have also identified oxymora in the Heart Sutra that likewise communicate the central Buddhist message about EMPTINESS. We define an oxymoron as: “a figure of speech that combines two normally contradictory terms to make a point.”⁵ For example, a passage in the text referring to

⁵For the source of the definition, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxymoron>. Oxymora abound in Buddhist language, and we argue that they should nevertheless be viewed not as a decorative figure of speech but rather as a rhetorical strategy that communicates important teachings. There are even more oxymora in another important Buddhist text, the Diamond Sutra. For detail, see Chiang and Lu (2007).

EMPTINESS states: “*All phenomena are empty, without inherent characteristics, they have no end and no beginning, are pure, but not pure, and can be neither increased nor decreased.*” We believe that it is intuitively uncommon for an entity to have no beginning (to be “unproduced”) and to have no end (to be “unceasing”) in that an end presupposes existence, i.e., the quality of having been produced. Likewise neither can an entity be “pure” and “not pure” at the same time. According to this definition, given their structure of parallel contradictions, such statements will be considered oxymora.

AN ULTIMATE PARADOX: THE PRISON HOUSE OF LANGUAGE

The central message of Buddhism is its advocacy of transcending the self to attain the perfect wisdom *nirvana*, as previously mentioned. However, scrutiny of the language use in the Heart Sutra reveals a paradox: The language used to promote non-attachment to the body or to the sensations is actually grounded in basic embodied experiences. Specifically, we cover perception- and motor-based metaphors below.

Perception-Based Metaphors

We have identified numerous perception-based metaphors, which will be presented in the order of their appearance in the text. The majority consists of visual metaphors, while one exception concerns gustatory sensation. In (3) above, the bodhisattva, a generic reference to a person who is attaining enlightenment, frees him/herself literally by 觀, i.e., looking at and observing his/her own mind (Chao, 1995). A metaphorical mapping from the source domain of vision to the target domain of understanding is clearly at work here. As to (4), the bodhisattva further 照見—“sees by reflection,” or metaphorically “understands”—that the “five aggregates” (a phrase indicating that form, sensations, the faculty of discrimination, acting, and knowing are actually constructed experiences) reflect the nature of EMPTINESS. A projection from the visual domain to the mental domain is traceable in this instance. These metaphors accordingly match the “KNOWING IS SEEING” metaphor identified by Lakoff and Johnson (1999, p. 238).

Alternatively, 照 can mean “to shine, to project,” and 見 is “to see, as opposed to looking”; it is the *result* of looking and involves recognition. The compound can suggest that “seeing” is “projecting,” and that there is something brilliant about it, like light. Within the limits of how the Western discipline of physics conceives of the world, that light and vision cannot truly be separated; they are separate only as concepts or categories, but not when experienced. However, 照見 might not be just about the physics and physiology of vision, as those Western disciplines construct

such things, but rather it is the “light” cast by the observing mind, that it refers to awareness itself.⁶ Seen this way, *seeing* is the world coming into existence and “*seeing by means of projection*” can be mapped to the metaphor “AN AID TO KNOWING IS A LIGHT SOURCE” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 238). Note that “AN AID TO KNOWING IS A LIGHT SOURCE” in a western metaphor might bring to mind the image of a person under a lamp that casts light upon a limited range of phenomena, so the knower may “see” them, leaving everything beyond its scope in darkness. In the Heart Sutra, the light (and to some extent the “objects” it reveals) is not *outside* the knower enabling the knower to “see,” but is generated by the knower. The knower is the source of light. Perception, or rather, awareness itself, is the light.

The following instances also reflect the use of light to refer to understanding and exemplify the metaphorical notion that “AN AID TO KNOWING IS A LIGHT SOURCE”:

(5) “無 明”

no light

“(for someone to) *stay in the dark; ignorance*”

(6) 故 知... 是 “大 明 咒”

so know... is big bright mantra

“So (we) know that... (the Heart Sutra) is the *most illuminating mantra*.”

Example (5) is a typical lexical item that illustrates comparing a light source to an aid to understanding: In Chinese, 明 is a polysemous word referring both to “light” and “understanding”. The word is found to frequently co-occur with words from the visual domain and in this text it means understanding, so a metaphorical transfer is straightforward here. In excerpt (6) the mantra (a recited, magical phrase that represents the entire meaning of the text) is described as a big, bright one, meaning that it can guide anyone who believes in its power to generate wisdom. The language here also involves a cross-domain projection from the domain of visual perception to the mental domain.

The word 大 “big” in (6) can also be categorized as a perception-based metaphor since the visual effect of something being big, at the conceptual level, implies its significance.⁷ Such conceptualization can be based on the metaphor “IMPOR- TANT IS BIG” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 50).

⁶The Sutra points to a state of “nonduality,” of not distinguishing the (human) subject from seemingly “external” objects of perception.

⁷The concept of BIG can be analyzed either as a visual metaphor or as a motion-based metaphor. In other words, an entity can be visually big, or big with respect to motor experiences of object manipulation.

Still another perception-related metaphor in the Heart Sutra is of gustation, specifically referring to “bitterness” as pain and suffering in human life, as in (7):

(7) “無 苦 集 滅 道”

no bitterness origin cessation path/road

“*There is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path (in EMPTINESS).*”

In Chinese, the word 苦 routinely carries the dual meanings of “bitterness” and “suffering.” Such polysemy demonstrates a cross-domain mapping from the source category of taste to the target category of suffering, i.e., a comparison of suffering and pain in life to an unpleasant taste. Bitterness, a loathsome gustatory sensation, can thus be employed to understand the undesirability of painfulness. The figure of speech suggests the metaphor “DISTURBING IDEAS ARE DISGUSTING FOODS” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 241).

Motor-based Metaphors

The language of the Heart Sutra abounds in lexical expressions from the source domain of motion or journeying. In this subsection, motor-based metaphors, i.e., metaphor use that concerns object manipulation or motor schemas, will be addressed. First we present conceptual metaphors with clear destinations. Example (8) and the third line of (9), below, are typical of such destination-salient metaphors:

(8) “行 深 般若 波羅蜜多 時”

walk deep wisdom paramita time

“*When (a bodhisattva reaches) the far shore of wisdom*”

(9) 無 “無 明”

no no light

“*There is no so-called ignorance.*”

亦 無 “無明 ” “盡”

also no ignorance end

“*Also, there is no ending of ignorance.*”

乃 “至” 無 老 死

even to no aging death

“*There is even no aging and death.*”

亦 無 老 死 “盡”

also no aging death end

“*Also, there is no extinction of aging and death.*”

The character 行 bears obvious polysemy in Chinese, indicating both “walk” and “practice” at the same time. We argue that the use of 行 involves a conceptualization of the practice of meditation for wisdom as walking or traveling. The expression paramita in (8) is a transliteration from Sanskrit into Mandarin, which means “the far shore,” implying the destination of a sea journey. The idea of attaining a state of profound wisdom is conveyed via the metaphor of arrival at the other side of a rough sea. Therefore the state of profound wisdom is represented as a location, with the journey symbolizing a spiritual quest for the utmost wisdom. The third line of (9) is also representative of motor experience in that it recruits a state of no aging and no death to describe arriving at spiritual attainment, as manifested by the use of the word 至 “to.” The examples above involve several event structure metaphors: “STATES ARE LOCATIONS, PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS,” and “LONG-TERM, PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITIES ARE JOURNEYS” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 179).

In addition to the above two instances, we argue that the second and the fourth lines in (9) exhibit an event structure metaphor. The word 盡, meaning “end,” in the two lines portrays the extinction of a state of being as the end of a path, i.e., 盡 “end” as in 盡頭 “end of the road,” another cross-domain correspondence between the domain of journey and that of a state: “END OF A STATE IS END OF PATH.”

The above examples are all associated with the concept of destination, i.e., the end of a journey. In contrast, the following passage (10) pertains to movement or journeying, but not in a way related to a literal destination or a metaphorical purpose. It focuses on the path instead:

- (10) “度” 一切 “苦厄”
 cross/pass every bitterness and misfortune
 “(The bodhisattva) *overcomes* all *suffering*.”

What instances (10) and (7) have in common is their employment of JOURNEY as their source domain and their focus on the idea of a path, but they do not share the idea of destination or start. In excerpt (10), suffering, or 苦, is compared to a space that the bodhisattva literally crosses, viz. 度 “to cross/pass,” and hence metaphorically overcomes; also in (7), 道, meaning “path/ road,” refers to the method taught by the Buddha that can lead to *nirvana*. 道, method or way, is coded as a road that takes one to somewhere unspecified. A metaphorical mapping between the domains of JOURNEY, MENTAL STATES, as in (10) and METHOD, as in (7), is thus apparent.

Rather than focusing on the path or on the destination of a journey, the metaphors below emphasize an obstacle to a journey as in (11) and a place to avoid (12):

(11) “心 無 罣礙”

heart no obstruction

“There is no *hindrance* in your heart.”

(12) “遠離 顛倒 夢想”

go away from upside-down dream

“(You should) *distance yourself from* erroneous thoughts.”

The language use in (11) is also typical of the journey metaphor, construing impediments and conceptual difficulties as obstacles in one's path. “DIFFICULTIES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOTION” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 179) may underlie such language use. Instance (12), for example, advises one to stay away from “upside-down dreams,” and compares such dreams to places from which one should distance oneself during one's trip-as-life.

Finally, two more metaphors based on motor experiences—orientational ones—are found in the Heart Sutra, exemplified by (12) above and (13) below:

(13) “般若” “波羅蜜多” ... 是 “無 上” 咒

wisdom paramita ... is no up mantra

“The wisdom spreading *paramita* is *the unsurpassed, the unequalled* mantra.”

A shared feature of these two examples is that they are grounded in the human experience of physical direction. “GOOD IS UP” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 16) motivates the language use in (13). On the other hand, the reason that “upside-downness” in example (12) conveys a negative meaning can be attributed to the “me-first” orientation proposed by Cooper and Ross (1975). They argue that the canonical person should be upright, front, active, good, and here. Consequently, what is upside-down is less normal and so tends to receive a negative evaluation.

Based on the above illustrations, a paradox emerges from the incongruity between Heart Sutra's advocacy of non-attachment to the body and its bodily oriented language use at the micro-level. In other words, the text draws heavily on basic sensori-motor domains to illustrate abstract and subjective experiences. Perhaps this is the postmodern “prison house of language” as Jameson (1975) remarked in his discussion of the limits on awareness imposed by language, claiming that all sensory perceptions are organized through language. In the Buddhist tradition there exists a similar notion of 文字般若, “the wisdom of knowing things in their temporary and changing condition.” The notion explains the misleading nature of language/words

and warns followers that language does not equal the realization of wisdom; only through constant reflection or meditation can one get to the heart of wisdom, even though language/words are usually necessary for communicating wisdom.

EMPTINESS IN MACRO-LEVEL METAPHORS AND OXYMORA

In this section, we shall further claim that an exploration of EMPTINESS through its metaphors actually allows us to relate Buddhism to the theory of the embodied mind. We shall demonstrate in detail that opaque metaphors and oxymora characteristic of the Heart Sutra are, perhaps surprisingly, tightly connected to the principle of the mind as embodied. Findings addressing the macro-level meanings of the Heart Sutra will be presented in four parts below. The first three parts discuss how the characteristically Buddhist rhetorical strategies of metaphors and oxymora convey EMPTINESS and generate further interpretations. We finally present the critical role of EMPTINESS in the text as a pathway to ultimate wisdom. After an elaboration on the pivotal concept of EMPTINESS, a comparison between the Buddhist mind and the cognitive embodied mind will follow in the next section.

The Metaphor of “*THE FIVE AGGREGATES ARE EMPTY*”

First and foremost, the language most worth investigating at the discourse level is the metaphor, “*THE FIVE AGGREGATES ARE EMPTY*.” The five aggregates constitute a sentient being. These are form, sensation, thought, action, and human awareness, which are referred to as “aggregates,” because Buddhists understand them as composite or constructed experiences. According to the Heart Sutra, all these represent the essence of EMPTINESS. Example (4) is repeated here to illustrate this point:

(4) “照 見” “五蘊 皆 空”

reflect see five aggregates all empty

“(S/he) sees by reflection that the five aggregates are all empty.”

The five aggregates are intimately related to the discussion of EMPTINESS. Before a thorough discussion of this metaphor per se, a more precise definition of the five aggregates is necessary. The aggregates include: (1) 色, form or physical matter as it relates to the objects perceived by the five sense organs and the materials that form our body; (2) 受 sensations and feelings, including physical sensations and emotional states relating to external affairs; (3) 想 thought, meaning the function of the mind that makes distinctions; (4) 行 action, which in-

cludes what we do and say; and (5) 識 the sum total of human awareness or consciousness, which is influenced by the previous four aggregates. The meaning of the statement, then, is this: physical form, our sensations and feelings, the judgments or distinctions we make, and what we do and say, are all, in essence, EMPTY. EMPTINESS, as previously mentioned, represents the “dependent nature” of all matter and phenomena in Buddhist thinking (Lopez, 1988, p. 59). Hence the concept does not refer to physical matter and phenomena as being literally void, but that the materials that form our body are never absolute or fixed; our sensations and feelings also depend on our sense organs and interaction with external stimuli, and our thoughts and ability to categorize seem under the influence of the “outside” world as well; what we do and say likewise relates to our surroundings. The combination of these five processes is the idea of the human being as composed of five aggregates.

But what does this have to do with overcoming distress and suffering? Fully realizing that the five aggregates that comprise our experience are relative, attachment is shown to be impractical or futile. All pain and suffering dissolve the moment one experiences the empty nature of FORM, because seen in this light, the pain and suffering one undergoes actually derive from one’s attitude toward seemingly external phenomena, specifically, from attachment to things as essential to one’s self. Suffering comes from the experience one generates of having a self. We identify transient phenomena as essential to our selves and suffer when impermanence, a fundamental characteristic of our world, denies us things “we” think we “possess.” Suffering is resisting loss of something we are attached to, whether material or abstract. The relief of all suffering, in other words, boils down to the realization of EMPTINESS, viz. the dependent nature of the five aggregates. The concept of the five aggregates thus helps make sense of metaphors of EMPTINESS.

Oxymora as Paradoxes: The Metaphors of “FORM IS EMPTY” and “EMPTINESS IS FORM”

“FORM IS EMPTY” and “EMPTINESS IS FORM” are a set of overarching metaphors and oxymora identified in the text. These statements reflect the fundamental belief in FORM as a concept opposed to EMPTINESS, which is the true nature of all phenomena perceived and all physical matter in interaction with human beings. The following metaphors in (1) and (2) introduce the imaginary nature of FORM with respect to EMPTINESS:

(1) “色 不 異 空 空 不 異 色”

color/form no different empty empty no different color/form

“Form (color) is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form.”

(2) “色 即是 空 空 即是 色”

color/form is exactly empty empty is exactly color/form
 “*Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.*”

These opaque anadiploses do not equate EMPTINESS with the literal destruction of FORM, but instead refer to “the lack of a falsely imagined intrinsic nature in form” (Lopez, 1988, p. 59). Only without false constructs can EMPTINESS, the pure nature of all matter and everything appearing as form, be revealed. As FORM is one of the five aggregates, we have already explained the metaphor “FORM IS EMPTY” through “THE FIVE AGGREGATES ARE EMPTY.” But what about “EMPTINESS IS FORM”? If our understanding of every concept and every thing is based on discourse and imagination, hence relative, or EMPTY, it must still be recognized that these surface appearances, albeit EMPTY in nature, do exist as the products of perception and interaction with the world. That is, the very essence of every phenomenon, EMPTINESS, produces FORM and needs to manifest itself in certain superficial ways. This set of metaphors is therefore also based on the dependent nature of FORM and its underlying pure essence or precondition: EMP-TINESS.

We find that an abundance of oxymora is a prominent feature of the Heart Sutra. We argue that the deployment of oxymora in the text is neither random nor for pure literary effect. On the contrary, oxymora will be shown as a rhetorical device for communicating the paradoxical meaning of EMPTINESS. Example (14) instantiates another set of oxymora:

(14) “是 諸法 空相 不 生 不 滅

this all phenomena empty no produce no extinct
 不 垢 不 淨 不 增 不 減
 no dirty no clean no increase no decrease

“*All phenomena are empty, without characteristics, neither beginning nor ending, neither pure nor impure, neither increasing nor decreasing.*”

The pairs of modifiers in (14) are polar, indicating simply opposite attributes. The intentional use of semantically polar modifiers creates oxymora and leads to a question: How are all phenomena simultaneously neither beginning nor ending? How can something be both pure and impure at the same time? Can anything remain neither increasing nor decreasing at all times?

These oxymora communicate the spirit of EMPTINESS, which claims FORM as its surface instantiation via external stimuli. Given the belief that EMPTINESS underlies FORM, every perceived phenomenon is in some sense illusory, simply EMPTY. Accordingly, what is conceived of as arising or coming into existence is essentially not arising; what is conceived of as extinguished is essentially not ex-

tinguished; what is conceived of as impure is not essentially impure; what is conceived of as pure is essentially not pure; what is conceived of as increasing is essentially not increasing; what is conceived of as decreasing is essentially not decreasing. The distinctions between arising/extinguished, pure/impure and increasing/decreasing thus do not matter, in that these perceived categories are merely subjective judgments. Moreover, the values or meaning assigned to the above phenomena are also relative: Since they are all superficial constructs, it is not necessarily positive to be arising, pure, or increasing, and it is not necessarily negative to be extinguishing, impure, or decreasing.⁸ A closer look at such uses of oxymora proves the paradoxical nature of EMPTINESS.

As has been mentioned above, oxymora appear extensively throughout the sutra. The following lines are typical:

(9) 無 “無 明”

no no light

“There is no so-called ignorance.”

亦 無 “無明” “盡”

also no ignorance end

“Also, there is no ending of ignorance.”

乃 “至” 無 老 死

even to no aging death

“There is even no aging and death.”

亦 無 老 死 “盡”

also no aging death end

“Also, there is no extinction of aging and death.”⁹

The passage can be explained by EMPTINESS and FORM. It has been argued that FORM, as the superficial manifestation of all phenomena and matter, is ultimately EMPTY, i.e., dependent on the surroundings. The implications of the excerpt are: Since all phenomena are EMPTY, it is pointless to distinguish ignorance, aging or death from other concepts, and the extinction of these constructs accordingly does not matter at all. The use of the rhetorical device of oxymora is hence

⁸Value judgments may involve conceptual metaphors such as “GOOD IS UP”, “BAD IS DOWN”, “MORE IS UP”, “LESS IS DOWN,” etc.

⁹Ignorance, and aging-and-death represent the first and the last of the twelve links in the chain of existence: (1) 無明 ignorance, or unenlightenment; (2) 行 action, activity, conception, “dispositions”; (3) 識 consciousness; (4) 名色 name and form; (5) 六入 the six sense organs, i.e. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind; (6) 觸 contact, touch; (7) 受 sensation, feeling; (8) 愛 thirst, desire, craving; (9) 取 laying hold of, grasping; (10) 有 being, existing; (11) 生 birth; (12) 老死 old age, death.

clear: Whether the concepts and the distinctions between the concepts disappear or not, such concepts are no more than surface instantiations, viz. FORM.

Shedding New Light on Surface Redundancy

As we have demonstrated, metaphors and oxymora are important discursive devices to convey the Buddhist teaching of EMPTINESS in the Heart Sutra. Moreover, some seemingly redundant statements can afford an entirely different interpretation on account of EMPTINESS. Excerpt (15) is a typical example: It is stated that in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, and so on. With the general belief of emptiness as an absolute vacuum, this statement sounds utterly straightforward and may be dismissed as senseless at first blush. However, given EMPTINESS as the heart of all phenomena, the underlying essence of all physical matter perceived, and of every thought conceived, the excerpt affords an entirely different interpretation.

(15) “空 中 無 色

empty	in	no	color/form			
無	受	想	行	識		
no	sensation	discrimination	action	consciousness		
無	眼	耳	鼻	舌	身	意
no	eye	ear	nose	tongue	body	mind
無	色	聲	香	味	觸	法”
no	color/form	sound	odor	taste	touch	phenomena

“(Therefore, Sariputra,) in emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no discrimination, no action, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no form, no sound, no odor, no taste, no object of touch—no phenomena.”

As has been established previously, FORM and EMPTINESS are two seemingly opposite notions but in fact the former is the surface appearance of the latter manifesting as external stimuli. However, what are the “external stimuli” mentioned above? The answer lies in the metaphor “THE FIVE AGGREGATES ARE EMPTY.” The six “organs” that give rise to the five aggregates, viz. eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and the six qualities produced by the sense organs and their objects—namely, form, sound, odor, taste, sensations, and phenomena—must be addressed in detail. The six organs and six qualities produced by the sense organs and their objects are presented as counterparts in the Heart Sutra. In other words, the qualities are dependent on the interaction of the sense organs with the objects of perception. Accordingly, we believe that (15) should not be taken literally as “in emptiness there is nothing at all.” Instead, given the meaning of EMPTINESS, FORM does not matter, since FORM is

only an effect of perceptual processes. Following this, sensation, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness do not matter either, in that they are also among the five aggregates, as is FORM. Also by analogy, the six organs, i.e., eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, as mediated perceptions and conceptions, are all mere surface appearances as well, in that our five senses and our minds also are produced from EMPTINESS: they are relative and imaginary categorizations we impose on experience. Therefore the other five qualities—sound, odor, taste, sense of touch and phenomena—are quite similar to the first, FORM, and they are also dependent on our perceptual and mental faculties, which obscure the nature of EMPTINESS.¹⁰ Hence, we emphasize that an understanding of EMPTINESS as something more than its literal meaning is required to derive the appropriate interpretation from the Buddhist text, as example (15) has demonstrated.

EMPTINESS: Pathway to the Ultimate Wisdom

The sutra refers to the power of EMPTINESS in the following passage:

(16) 依 “般若” “波羅蜜多” 故 “心 無 罣礙”
 according to wisdom paramita so heart no obstruction
 無 “罣礙” 故 無 有 恐怖
 no obstruction so no have fear

“[T]he bodhisattva relies on *paramita* so the mind is no *hindrance*. Without *hindrances*, there is no fear.”

“遠離 顛倒 夢想 究竟 涅槃”
 away from upside-down dream reach nirvana

“(You should) distance yourself from erroneous thoughts to enter nirvana.”

The insights of the Heart Sutra lead to *nirvana*, the ultimate perfection of wisdom in the Buddhist tradition. These insights enable one to move without hindrance because what is feared is in fact a surface illusion and so is essentially nothing to be afraid of. The Heart Sutra advocates residing in this awareness and refraining from delusions or imaginary constructs. Thus, with the attainment of wisdom, all suffering can be pacified, according to (17):

(17) 故 知 “般若” “波羅蜜多” 是 “大神咒”
 so know wisdom paramita is big magic mantra
 是 “無上咒” 是 “無等等咒”
 is no up mantra is not equal equal mantra

¹⁰The six roots in Mahayana Buddhism include: form, sound, odor, taste, sensations, and phenomena.

“能 除 一 切 苦” 真 實 不 虛

can eliminate all suffering true not false

“Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the great magic mantra, the most illuminating mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra with no equal, the mantra that completely eliminates all suffering. It is not false, and should be known to be true.”

The mantra is acknowledged in this passage as a key to the great wisdom that removes all suffering. The power of the mantra, as mentioned previously, comes from the conceptualization of EMPTINESS, which transcends superficial perceptions and transient surface phenomena. Suffering, as a negative judgment, is certainly among them.

THE BUDDHIST MIND AND THE COGNITIVE-EMBODIED MIND

From the discussion of EMPTINESS above, we may further identify the following similarities between the Buddhist mind and the cognitive theorists' embodied mind.

First, the relation of dependence describing the interaction of the sense organs and the objects observed in Buddhism is reminiscent of a fundamental belief in cognitive linguistics: meaning arises from embodiment, our experiential patterns of bodily interaction with the environment (Gibbs et al., 2004; Johnson, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). The six organs mediate human activities in the world and by doing so produce the qualities experienced, matching cognitive philosophy's fundamental assumption of organisms engaging the environment.

Second, humans heavily rely on the sensori-motor domain to build abstract inference patterns (Grady, 1997; Johnson, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The six organs, as the most basic human perceptual elements, are recruited here to illustrate the omnipresent nature of EMPTINESS, which underlies even the most basic, seemingly true and direct experiences, so the five aggregates that arise from the six organs to constitute a sentient being are also EMPTY, i.e., dependent in nature.

Third, the relation between the six organs and their corresponding six properties in Buddhism illustrates the imaginative nature of reason and reality, similarly mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson. In Buddhism, the six organs give rise to all perceptions and conceptions and shape our imaginations, namely they produce those superficial appearances experienced as FORM. In the Heart Sutra, such imaginary constructs are labeled “upside-down” meaning “delusory” and are best avoided. This might parallel Lakoff and Johnson's (1999, pp. 77–78) remark on the imaginative nature of reason: “Reason is imaginative in that bodily inference forms are mapped onto abstract modes of inference by metaphor.”

Fourth, we argue that EMPTINESS also generates an inferential consequence regarding automatic human acts of categorization. Similar to metaphorical thinking, categorization is unconscious and serves a number of functions: learning, planning, communication and economy (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 74). For example, a piece of glass can be “a bit stained/impure”, or, from another viewpoint, it can be “roughly stainless/pure” at the same time. How we describe the same piece of glass essentially relies on whether we categorize it as “stained/impure” or “stainless/pure”. In the Heart Sutra, the polar categories employed in the text illustrate context-dependent categorization: the distinctions between beginning/no beginning, ending/never ending, pure/impure, increasing/decreasing do not bear significance since the distinctions are never made objectively. By the same token, ignorance, aging, and death are also subjectively conceived categories that are EMPTY in essence, and the extinctions of these subjectively construed notions are EMPTY as well. The scripture accordingly reveals that categories are never static or pre-conceived and are always dependent on non-objective judgments. This Buddhist idea of categories as dynamic is similar to the cognitivist view of categorization: “The structure of concepts includes prototypes of various sorts... Most concepts are not characterized by necessary and sufficient conditions.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 77–78) Croft and Cruse’s (2004) detailed explication of the process of categorization similarly argues for a view of concepts as dynamic and of boundaries between concepts as not always clear cut or fixed.

Finally, both Buddhist philosophy and the cognitivist theory of embodied mind are aware of the limitation of sensori-motor experiences that facilitate abstract reasoning. We have already demonstrated at length that the Buddhist tradition has long recognized the limitations of bodily experience. Cognitivists like Lakoff and Johnson (1980:156) notice the fact that “metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities.” In this way, we can regard metaphors as both highlighting and hiding certain aspects of subjective experience. A typical example is Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980:10) “ARGUMENT IS WAR.” Such a simple metaphor draws on basic motor experiences, allowing us to *attack* other’s position, to *wipe* your enemy *out*, or to *shoot down* an argument. Yet this conceptualization, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, eclipses some other aspects of argument. The “cooperative aspect” of argument, such as spending time discussing in order to reach a mutual understanding, falls outside the focus of the metaphor and as a result becomes less salient. This is one manifestation of inferential patterns imposed by motor experience on how we understand the concept ARGUMENT.

FINAL REMARKS: EMPTINESS WE LIVE BY

As a final remark, we would like to point out that the paradox occurring in the Heart Sutra, as we have illustrated at length, is reminiscent of Lakoff and John-

son's (1999, pp. 254–255) observation that many areas of analytic philosophy are actually rich in embodied conceptual metaphors. They demonstrate that analytic philosophical theories “reject the very idea of conceptual metaphor” but ironically have been “constructed out of those everyday metaphors.” Typical examples of metaphors for mind in analytic philosophy they identify include “THE MIND AS BODY,” “THOUGHT AS MOTION,” “THOUGHT AS OBJECT MANIPULATION,” etc. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 248–249) Although the Buddhist philosophy of mind is not an Anglo-American analytic philosophy, as a philosophy of mind that advocates non-attachment to bodily inferential patterns, Buddhism cannot avoid use of embodied metaphors in its scripture which serves as doctrine-conveying text.

We hope that our linguistic analysis of this classic text has shed some Buddhist light on the enigma of the workings of the mind in general. We believe that the claim we have advanced should stand for other important Buddhist texts and that further research on other Buddhist texts is needed to unravel the mystery of this influential religion of the East. As communications between East and West become increasingly important, we anticipate that this paper might serve as the starting point for new dialogues between the Eastern religion and the Western philosophy of mind.

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APPENDIX

The full text of the Heart Sutra is attached below.

“觀 自 在” 菩薩

look self exist bodhisattva

“The bodhisattva who observes and sets him/herself free”

行 深 “般若” “波羅蜜多 時”

walk deep wisdom paramita time

“When a bodhisattva reaches the far shore of wisdom”

“照 見” “五蘊 皆 空”

reflect see five aggregates all empty

“(S/he) sees by reflection that the five aggregates are all empty.”

“度” 一切 “苦厄”

cross/pass every bitterness and misfortune

“(The bodhisattva) overcomes all suffering.”

舍利子

Sariputra

“Sariputra!”

“色 不 異 空 空 不 異 色”
 color/form no different empty empty no different color/form
“Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form.”

“色 即是 空 空 即是 色”
 color/form is exactly empty empty is exactly color/form
“Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”

“受 想 行 識 亦復 如是”
 sensation discrimination compositional factor consciousness also so
“In the same way, sensation, discrimination, action, consciousness are empty as well.”

舍利子
 Sariputra
 “Sariputra!”

“是 諸法 空相 不 生 不 滅”
 this all phenomena empty no birth no extinction

不 垢 不 淨 不 增 不 減”
 no impure no pure no increase no decrease
“All phenomena are empty, without characteristics, neither beginning nor ending, neither pure nor impure, neither increasing nor decreasing.”

是 故
 this reason
 “For this reason,”

“空 中 無 色”
 empty in no color/form

無 受 想 行 識
 no sensation discrimination action consciousness

無 眼 耳 鼻 舌 身 意
 no eye ear nose tongue body mind

無 色 聲 香 味 觸 法”
 no color/form sound odor taste touch phenomena
“Therefore, Sariputra, in the emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no discrimination, no action, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no

tongue, no body, no mind; no form, no sound, no odor, no taste, no object of touch, no phenomena."

“無 眼 界”
no eye world
“no eye and no world of vision”

乃 “至” 無 意識 界
even to no consciousness world
“even to the extent of no world of consciousness”

“無 無 明”
no no bright
“There is no such thing as ignorance.”

亦 無 “無 明” “盡”
also no no bright end
“Also, there is no ending of ignorance.”

“乃” 至 無 老 死
even to no aging death
“Even there is no aging and death.”

亦 無 老 死 “盡”
also no aging death end
“Also, there is no extinction of aging and death.”

“無 苦 集 滅 道”
no bitterness origin cessation path/road
“There is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path (in EMPTINESS).”

“無 智 亦 無 得”
no wisdom and no attainment
“There is no wisdom and nothing to be attained.”

“以 無 所得 故”
because no attainment reason
“Because there is nothing to attain,”

菩提薩埵
bodhisattvas

依 “般若” “波羅蜜多” 故 “心 無 罣礙”
 rely upon wisdom paramita so heart no obstruction

無 “罣礙” 故 無 有 恐怖
 no obstruction so no have fear

“[T]he bodhisattva relies on *paramita*, so the mind is no *hindrance*. Without *hindrances*, there is no fear.”

“遠離 顛倒 夢想 究竟 涅槃”
 away from upside-down dream reach nirvana

“(You should) distance yourself from erroneous thoughts to enter nirvana.”

三 世 諸 佛
 three time all buddha

依 “般若” “波羅蜜多” 故
 according to wisdom paramita so

得 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提
 get fully awakened into unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment

“The buddhas of the three ages (past, present & future) have obtained a state of unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment through dependence on the wisdom-spreading *paramita*.”

故 知 “般若” 波羅蜜多 “大神咒” “大神咒”
 so know wisdom paramita is big magic mantra big bright mantra

是 “無 上” 咒 是 “無 等 等 咒”
 is no up mantra is no equal equal mantra

能 除 一切 苦 真實 不 虛
 can rid every suffer true no false

“Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the great magic mantra, the mantra of enlightenment, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra with no equal, the mantra that completely eliminates all suffering. It is not false and should be known to be true.”

故 說 “般若” “波羅蜜多” 咒
 so say wisdom paramita mantra

即 說 咒 曰

just say mantra goes

“So the mantra of the Wisdom-spreading *paramita* is pronounced thus:”

揭諦 揭諦 波羅揭諦 波羅僧揭諦 菩提 薩婆訶

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha

“Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.”