Ambiguity and the Concern with Language in the Traditions of Chinese Buddhist Philosophy

Abstract:

Although technical terms often represent unambiguous meanings, the crucial expression �emptiness' in Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions is likely to serve a soteriological function. The doctrine of emptiness seems to be intended to detach our linguistic expression from the unwholesome influence of illusory assumptions; assumptions of which we are not aware in our referential acts. Buddhist texts often reveal our linguistic habits as the very root of inverse views inflicting unwholesome results on our existence.

On the other hand, Buddhists also believe that there is a mode of expression which initiates the transformation from the unwholesome into the wholesome. It is a mode of expression which causes us to become aware of the falseness inherent to linguistic expression. Consequently, Mahāyāna traditions treat and utilize linguistic expression in an ambiguous way; that is not only as the source of the unwholesome but also as the very impulse initiating its transformation into the opposite. Since the teaching about �emptiness' is self-referential, the functioning of emptiness must shape the linguistic expression in those Buddhist texts expanding on this doctrine. The compositional pattern of these texts frequently displays an ambiguous feature.

In some Chinese traditions, the ambiguous mode of linguistic expression received new inspirations from the very mark of the Chinese classical language itself � its mark of ambiguity. In my paper, I attempt to outline both the Mahāyāna Buddhist concern with language and the extent to which ambiguity in Chinese language may have inspired Chinese Buddhist thinkers in designing the compositional pattern of their texts. Since the doctrine of emptiness is a common foundation for all Mahayana teachings in China , my investigation intends to expose the Buddhist inclination to ambiguity as a major tendency in the traditions of various Chinese Buddhist schools.

Keywords: emptiness, ambiguity, linguistic expression, contradiction in performance

Introduction

In this paper, I try to expound two of the major issues marking the philosophical reflection about language in Chinese Buddhism: The first involves the question about the relationship between linguistic expression and existing things to which one refers. This issue deals with Chinese Buddhist views on the ontological status regarding the referent of linguistic expression. The second points to the distinctive features of linguistic habits, which Chinese Buddhist teachings, based on these views, have particularly devised as an integrated part of their soteriological program. The compositional features of Chinese Buddhist texts themselves perform an exemplifying role within the Buddhist practice of transforming human existence. It is exactly this intention of combining speculative issues with practical concerns expressed by compositional means in Chinese Buddhist texts, which I want to elucidate in this paper.

The first chapters of my paper give an exposition about the function and meaning of �emptiness' with regard to the Mahāyāna conception of salvation and transformation of human existence. The subsequent part explains how this functioning and meaning of emptiness shapes the ambiguous mode of linguistic expression referring not only to emptiness itself but also to the performance of other subject matters in Buddhist thinking. Due to the Mahāyāna insight into the doctrine of emptiness, ambiguity becomes a particular characteristic marking both the linguistic habits and the evaluation of language of Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers. Linguistic expression, on the one hand, is considered the very root of delusive views entailing the unwholesome experience of our existence; on the other hand, linguistic habits with an obvious tendency to ambiguity seem to be positively deemed as the key in the transformative practice disclosing the wholesome.

The third part introduces various examples from the Chinese Tiantai, Yogacara and Huayan schools to illustrate Chinese Buddhists' tendencies of displaying the meaning of emptiness based on strategies of ambiguity, which are in turn closely bound up with the features of the classical Chinese language. In this section, I try to outline the degree to which Chinese Buddhist thinkers resort to the features of Chinese language in order to realize their intentions of combining speculative issues with practical concerns. One of the more important features consists of the indeterminacy with regard to the word class of Chinese characters and its semantic ambiguity. Chinese Buddhists tend to illustrate the soteriological meaning of the Mahāyāna doctrine of �emptiness' based on these features to facilitate the practitioner's approach to the Buddhist practice of transformation.

1. Transformation of Human Existence in Mahāyāna Buddhism

It seems unlikely that linguistic habits in the Mahāyāna traditions only intend to give technical descriptions or mere expositions of �Nirvana' and �Liberation' � which are the technical terms indicating the Buddhist concept of salvation. Instead, the performance of linguistic expression exhibited, particularly, in Chinese Buddhist texts seems more likely to be designed as a certain type of practice consummating the soteriological function of these concepts. Basically, �Nirvana'

means extinction of the unwholesome features marking sentient beings' sorrowful existence of arising and perishing, whereas �Liberation' mainly refers to the release from those factors which fetters human existence to these unwholesome marks.

Doctrines and practices taught by the Mahāyāna soteriology attempt to realize this goal of salvation for all sentient beings. Mahāyāna thinkers also believe that the unwholesome mode of sentient beings' existence is caused by their attachment to illusory views regarding this existence. The way, how sentient beings exist, shows, from the Mahāyāna Buddhist standpoint, that these sentient beings are unaware of their attachment to the unreal world built up by those illusory views. For sentient beings behave as if this world would embody their real habitat; but they do not realize that their attachment to the unreal inflicts all the unwholesome experiences on their existence. This unawareness is called �ignorance' � ignorance fundamentally causes sentient beings to misperceive their existence and experience it as subjected to unwholesome conditions.

Mahāyāna Buddhists further agree with the viewpoint that awareness with regard to these attachments and illusory views realizes that �wisdom' which may transform the unwholesome conditions into a wholesome mode. The practice of saving sentient beings consists of �transforming ignorance [=unawareness] into wisdom [=awareness]' inspired by the teaching of the �Buddha-dharma' [=Buddha Law]. Hence, the Chinese Buddhist term for the means and practice of �salvation' is indicated through the two characters of �teaching and transformation'. The soteriological formula in Mahāyāna Buddhism expressed in a concise way means: Achieving Nirvana and Liberation by means of teaching and transformation.

To further characterize that subject matter of philosophy with which Chinese Mahāyāna schools predominantly deal, I use the designation �transformation of human existence' (*zhuanhua*). The medium of this transformation is usually indicated through the expression *Xin* originally signifying the meaning of �heart', and, here, translated as �mental activity'. In Chinese Buddhist schools, all important doctrines are bound up with this expression. *Xin* also represents both the agent and the object in this transformation, which means that mental activity must transform itself. Mahāyāna Buddhists also claim that this self-transformation of mental activity affects other sentient beings' existence. According to the Tiantai, Huayan and Sanlun schools in Chinese Buddhism, the Mahāyāna-task of transforming all sentient beings must be performed via the self-transformation of one's own *Xin* into Buddha-wisdom benefiting others. In particular, the Tiantai and Huayan views on transformation imply three major points:

First, each sentient being's course of achieving salvation and liberation from suffering is combined with that of all the others. Doctrines like �via self-benefit benefiting others', �via self-practice transforming others' express such interdependence between sentient beings. The Huayan-school connects these doctrines with the crucial Buddhist teaching of �dependent origination' and develops a highly systematized conception of universal interdependence, which conception is essential to the Huayan-view of transformation.

Second, there is a polarity of soteriological values marking *Xin*, since *Xin*, which transforms unwholesome conditions into the wholesome, must be related to the two poles of the �sacred and profane'. Various Buddhist texts frequently use these two expressions and mostly discuss them combined. In Buddhist texts, the combination of the expressions �sacred and profane' occurs as

an epitome of this soteriological bipolarity. The Chinese character for the �sacred' points to that side of our existence which Buddhists evaluate as wholesome like �nirvana, Buddha, wisdom, real, transformation, non-attachment, liberation' etc; whereas the �profane' covers the opposite side evaluated as unwholesome, like �samsara, sentient beings, ignorance, unreal, inversion, attachment, fetter' etc. The Chinese Buddhist conception of transformation relates the attributes of the wholesome side and those of the unwholesome to each other like antonyms. Tiantai and Huayan texts, for example, emphasize that the two opposites, such as �nirvana and samsara', �realization and delusion', �real and unreal', �non-attachment and attachment' or �dharma-nature and ignorance', are indivisible. The respective two sides combined constitute a specific bipolar relation; and the �sacred and profane' is the general label representing their pattern of soteriological bipolarity. Specifications of this bipolarity, such as �samsara � nirvana', �sentient beings � Buddha', �unreal � real' etc are necessary in order to differentiate between the diverse issues constituting the soteriological conception in Buddhist teachings.

Third, transformation also implies polarity yet non-duality, since transforming the profane into the sacred requires that the profane must obtain this potential of being transformed. The transformation of the profane side into the sacred is possible, only if the profane is the inverse mode of the sacred. Here, the mutuality between the two poles should be noted: the profane side being the inverse mode of the sacred, and the sacred side being the transformed mode of the profane. In other words, the unwholesome mode of profane existence must embody the value of the other side � which is the sacred as inverse instruction. The unwholesome profane could be considered as the instructive clue inversely pointing to the wholesome sacred, which is comparable to physical pain being indispensable in the process of disclosing the medical therapy to heal sickness. This positive instruction of negative experience can only be referred to by means of paradoxical articulations such as �sorrow is bliss', �evil is good', �delusion is wisdom', �samsāra is nirvāna,' or �combination between the real and unreal' etc

Chinese Buddhist practices of transformation require the insight into this bipolar but non-dual structure of �inverse instruction,' otherwise our existence seems to be exposed to the unwholesome influence of our delusive views and attachments.

2. Falseness of Linguistic Expression

In the case of our human existence, attachments are regarded as �habitual tendencies' of which we are unaware, as long as we believe that a world of things exists exactly in the way we view it according to our linguistic expression. On the level of our conventional existence, we obviously presume permanent characteristics of things existing which can be indicated in verbal articulation. For that world, which we regard as our existential habitat, is a world of references and, thus, linguistically disclosed. Our referential acts are tied to the view that there must be a world of namable things existing. This also implies our claim that, in virtue of these evident marks we assume, things existing must be in conformity with names referring to them.

However, Mahāyāna Buddhists think that the dichotomy between marks of things existing and names pointing to them is just a delusive premise of which our daily consciousness is unaware and which, furthermore, seriously obstructs the Buddhist practice of transforming human existence. The Yogacara Buddhist texts, in particular, deal with the refutation of this premise. They point out that our unaware attachment to that type of distinction is the fundamental source of the unreal world into which the sense faculties of our ordinary consciousness are involved. Consequently, Yogacara Buddhists also deny that things existing are in conformity with names. For things existing are impermanent and, thus, cannot provide an abiding mark which could be constantly indicated by a corresponding name. We find this viewpoint, also expressed, in Sengzhao's treatise about emptiness (5th century), who generally counts as a representative of the Chinese Madhyamika-school: "*Things are just lacking that core of sustaining reality which would enable them to be in conformity with names; hence, they are not even things. Names are just lacking that function which would enable them to grasp* �*things'; hence they are not even names. Therefore, names are not in conformity with reality, and reality is not in conformity with names*�.

Buddhist practices of contemplation primarily focus on the impermanence of any item pertaining to our existential habitat and, thereby, detect that there ultimately is no abiding characteristic we can point to. The absence of a core of sustaining reality in our existential habitat is called emptiness; and this equals the absence of an evident clue which could be indicated. The Chinese Tiantai text *The Great Calming and Contemplation* ascribed to the Chinese monk Zhiyi (538-594) emphasizes this: "*While contemplating these six destinies [=our existential habitat] arising and perishing as impermanent, mental activity* � *the potency of contemplation does not abide either in any one of these moments during which it successively contemplates this. Again, both the potency contemplating and the object contemplated arise from conditions, and dependent origination is emptiness.*�

Not only the objects of contemplation � all the items pertaining to our existential habitat � but also the potency of contemplation � mental activity contemplating are devoid of self-sustaining reality due to their impermanence and non-abidingness. Things existing are, ultimately, devoid of any clue indicating this existence just because of the latter's �non-abidingness'.

Mahāyāna Buddhists, therefore, claim that linguistic reference yet implying a world of namable things existing just generates attachments to the unreal. While positing an evident clue as the abiding mark which indicates a certain thing existing, linguistic reference inverts non-abidingness of impermanent existence into unreal abidingness. For Yogacara Buddhists, this inversion into the unreal marks all the things we indicate as items pertaining to our existential habitat; and such inverse mark is called �*the clue everywhere intended to be held*'. Nagarjuna (2nd cent. A.D.) also defines the Buddhist notion of �inversion' as "*grasping permanence where there is impermanence.*�

Any performance of linguistic expression results in empty hypostatization to which we are attached, as long as we are not aware of these inversions into the unreal created by our linguistic expression. Consequently, distinguishing between marks of things existing and names pointing to them equals the unaware attachment to a hypostatisised world lacking a sustaining core of reality. Buddhists claim that only the insight into emptiness may cause us to become aware of the falseness

in our assumptions, into which we get inescapably involved as soon as we perform an act of linguistic expression trying to disclose our existential environment.

3. Ontological Indeterminacy and Ambiguity

The Buddhist term �inversion' accounts for the inevitably fictional character regarding the referent of our linguistic expression, as the latter inverts non-abidingness of impermanent existence into false abidingness. Referential acts creating these inversions necessarily conceal the fact that our existential habitat is devoid of abidingness. In other words, just in that moment during which we perform a certain referential act we cannot be aware of its inversion. One of the specific characteristics of this inversion is such that it even evades the access of controlling awareness in the very moment we attempt to point to it, since, when we state falseness caused through linguistic expression, we do this by means of linguistic expression and this, again, would include falseness. No referential act of our linguistic expression can escape this blind point to which our existence seems to be constantly exposed.

This becomes particularly obvious if we investigate �emptiness' � that self-referential doctrine in Buddhist teaching which may disclose the insight we need, in order to get released from the unwholesome inflictions caused by inversions. The expression �emptiness' is not intended to signify a univocal meaning; instead, as a linguistic device, it performs that function within the Buddhist practice of transformation by means of which awareness could be induced on the level of linguistic expression. The means upon which its function relies can be called �contradiction in performance', since only such type of contradiction can reveal that falseness on the level of linguistic expression, which this very level, through its referential acts, constantly conceals. The next section expounds in a more detailed way the extent to which this contradiction in performance induces a type of awareness which Buddhist thinkers deemed as necessary in their vision of human transformation. This section expands on emptiness as the functioning which points to the ontological indeterminacy or ambiguity of things existing � the indivisibility of their real and unreal side.

Emptiness verbalized as the doctrine based on which Buddhists claim that we can detect the falseness inevitably entangled with any referential act of linguistic expression only represents a linguistic expression. In other words, the insight into the falseness of linguistic expression based on emptiness must extend to the expression �emptiness' itself � which the Buddhist scriptures call �emptiness of emptiness.' Moreover, the various Mahāyāna scriptures often remark that �emptiness' cannot be regarded as a real thing; because the assumption of a real thing corresponding to the expression �emptiness' would exactly contradict that insight which this doctrine is supposed to induce. Nagarjuna hints at this directly:

"*If there were things not being empty, there would be also that thing �emptiness'. In fact, there are no things not being empty; how is it possible, then, that there is the thing �emptiness'? The Great Sages pronounced the doctrine of emptiness, in order to depart from the delusive views. However, if there is again the view of emptiness, all the Buddhas' efforts of transformation would prove to be inefficient.�* Because of emptiness, which even includes emptiness of emptiness, our

existential habitat can neither be linguistically referred to as consisting of entities � things sustaining an evident core of reality � nor be ultimately denied in a nihilistic sense. From the Buddhist viewpoint of emptiness, things existing just remain ontologically indeterminate or ambiguous, which means that those items viewed as pertaining to our existential habitat cannot be univocally called as either real or unreal; instead, Mahāyāna Buddhists tend to ascribe both a real and an unreal side to things existing.

A very frequent way of reasoning which we often find in the large diversity of Mahāyāna texts written in both Chinese and Sanskrit or even Tibetan is the �whole-part-argument.' Things existing are based on the accumulation of all partial conditions which, combined as a whole, give rise to its existence; however, the existing thing as the whole can be neither inside nor beyond each of its parts � there is no self-sustaining reality of it which we could find; and due to this emptiness it is, according to Nagarjuna, neither real nor unreal.

Nagarjuna demonstrates this ontological ambiguity with regard to the subject matter �time', which cannot be univocally called as either real or unreal, since it acquires both a real and an unreal side: On the one hand, a certain thing's duration viewed as the continuation of its past, presence and future cannot be held � that is the unreal side of time, as either this thing's presence and its future must ultimately coincide with its past, if we hold to the indivisibility of the three phases, or, the three cannot be demonstrated as being mutually related, if we stress their divisibility, so that neither their indivisibility nor their divisibility could account for the continuation constituting the whole duration of this thing. On the other hand, we cannot deny the temporality of this thing, since its existence is impermanent, which, again, hints at the real side of time. Chinese Buddhist thinkers often state that our existential habitat involves both sides � the real and the unreal in an indivisible manner.

According to a common standpoint in Chinese Mahāyāna, none of the sentient beings, including the Buddha, escapes these inversions in the sense that it achieves the real by severing the unreal. For Tiantai and Huayan Buddhists, the real side indicated as being separated from its unreal inverse is much as unreal. The only quality which distinguishes the Buddha from other sentient beings is his capability of unremittingly realizing that the unreal is unreal and, thereby, detecting its indispensable value of inverse instruction. The Buddha appearing in the Mahāyāna scriptures is a teacher or instructor who always deals with the unreal but never solely exists in a realm beyond it. Particularly, the Lotus Sutra � one of the most influential scriptures in East Asia � suggests such an image of the Buddhist sage.

According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the real side of our existence is indivisibly bound up with its unreal apparitions; and Tiantai Buddhists call the insight into this indivisibility �inconceivable realm.' The Tiantai simile about the surface of a mirror may illustrate this. From the Tiantai viewpoint, the mirror images on the surface represent the unreal apparitions: when these images emerge, there is nothing except the surface reflecting and those things reflected by this surface, yet the images emerging are neither the surface nor the things � in the context of this simile, they may be viewed as �unreal apparitions'. Though the surface of the mirror is always covered with these unreal apparitions, the surface itself is not unreal. The surface, as it really is, is not beyond the inverse mode of unreal apparitions; and the only way to become aware of and refer to its reality consists of realizing that it is never beyond these unreal apparitions.

Tiantai Buddhists directly combine this simile with the technical terms of their teaching: The surface of the mirror which is real yet never beyond the unreal and ever changing apparitions represents �emptiness'; the unreal and ever changing apparitions are called the �provisional' which refers to the impermanent items ascribed to our existential habitat; the third aspect concerns the indivisibility between/of the real and unreal, the technical term for this is called the �middle way' which also signifies the interchangeability between the three, since it simultaneously embodies emptiness and the provisional. Tiantai Buddhists use the Chinese term �threefold truth' � which was prevalent in the discourse among the diverse Chinese Buddhist thinkers between the fifth and the eighth centuries and often differently understood � to emphasize that each of the three �emptiness, the provisional, the middle' respectively embodies all of them as a whole. This Tiantai interpretation of ontological ambiguity also resorts to the ambiguous features of the Chinese language to stress the viewpoint that the Buddhist course of transformation necessarily involves the insight into the indivisibility between/of the real and unreal. This insight mainly means that we cannot escape the illusory, yet we can become aware of it; and in the very moment when we achieve this awareness we may detect its value of inverse instruction embodying the wholesome.

4. �Contradiction in Performance' and Ambiguity in the Evaluation of Language

Ambiguity with regard to the real and unreal side of emptiness becomes evident if we investigate the contradictory feature which emptiness on the level of linguistic expression unfolds. On the one hand, Nagarjuna stresses that voidness of self-sustaining reality constitutes the dependent origination of things existing, and this functioning of emptiness is called the �real mark' of those things. Many Mahāyāna scriptures agree with the statement that �voidness of marks' with regard to things existing is their �single mark' or the only �real mark' � a synonym of emptiness accounting for its real side. On the other hand again, due to emptiness of emptiness, there is no real thing conforming with the expression �emptiness' as there is no one being in conformity with any other expression either.

A concise example given by the ambiguous Chinese title of one of Sengzhao's essays called *Buzhenkong Lun* may illustrate this contradictory feature. Translated into English, it could mean both *On Emptiness of the Unreal* and *On Non-Real Emptiness*. The first reading affirms the real side of emptiness compared to the unreal items of our existential habitat; whereas the second exposes the falsity of the expression �emptiness'. The two meanings combined in this ambiguous Chinese expression hint at the indivisibility between the real and unreal. However, as we will see in this section, such ambiguity also includes the contradiction between the expressible and inexpressible marking emptiness.

Since there is no such thing that would really correspond to the expression �emptiness', emptiness verbalized does not really seem to indicate this functioning. It does not make any difference either, if we use, instead, the opposite term like �non-emptiness', to indicate this; its functioning is ultimately inexpressible. However, due to the interrelatedness of linguistic expressions, these two

terms just represent a pair of opposites and, yet, each side of it may provisionally embody the same functioning only modified according to the differing context on the level of linguistic expression.

For example, in order to avoid the attachment to a false understanding of �emptiness' as metaphysical nihilism (or even mysticism), the provisional designation �non-emptiness' may be appropriate to realize this functioning of emptiness. However, attachments to the expression �non-emptiness' are, again, objects of this deconstructive functioning, wherefore we must modify it into the opposite term �emptiness' to adjust it in correspondence with the changing context created by interrelated linguistic expressions. Due to this interrelatedness, the functioning of emptiness seems to modify itself incessantly by means of negation. In virtue of its self-reference, the functioning of emptiness must be indivisibly bound up with the provisional context of inversions created by the respective expressions, though it is ultimately inexpressible. For that reason, Nagarjuna says:

"*Emptiness is inexpressible; non-emptiness is also inexpressible; both emptiness and non-emptiness combined is inexpressible too; neither emptiness nor non-emptiness is as much as inexpressible, since [the functioning of emptiness] is only expressed by means of provisional designations.*� Due to the possible array of interrelated alternatives in linguistic expression � the affirmative, the negative, their synthesis, their transcendence � each of the four designations must provisionally display this functioning with regard to its interrelation to the others, though (and since) the functioning of emptiness is ultimately inexpressible.

Again, on the one hand, the universal functioning of emptiness � the �real mark' of things existing � is ultimately inexpressible; on the other hand, this �inexpressibility' yet consists of negative relation to its inversions or unreal side created by linguistic expression, which means that it is indivisible from provisional verbalization respectively pointing to a certain context of inversions. One of the early Mahāyāna Sutras called *Sutra of Great Wisdom* state: "*The sacred expresses the real mark [=emptiness] of all things existing without abandoning provisional designations!*�

Here, emptiness verbalized is just a provisional designation ultimately involving falseness, unless it is rejected, which, again, relies on provisional designation further involving ultimate falseness. Ultimately inexpressible emptiness (=the �real mark') consists of provisional verbalization incessantly exemplified. The Tiantai interpretation of the �threefold truth' elucidates this in particular; it even resorts to the peculiar feature of ambiguity in the Chinese language to exemplify that the contradiction between the expressible and inexpressible must be suspended, since such contradiction is, again, only provisionally designed on the level of linguistic expression. Zhiyi uses a quotation from the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* to hint at this:

"*One should realize: �All day long full of explanations equals non-explanation all day long; and, conversely, non-explanation all day long equals all day long full of explanations.'1 [1] Moreover, both explanations and non-explanation negated all day long equals both explanations and non-explanation illuminated all day long; for, there is construction while deconstructing, as well as*

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1 [1] See the chapter *Yuyan* (*Fable*) in the book of *Zhuangzi*.

there is deconstruction while constructing; all the Buddhist scriptures are alike.� Since ultimately inexpressible emptiness consists of provisional verbalization incessantly exemplified, the contradiction between the expressible and inexpressible, again, seems to have two sides. It must be suspended, as it amounts to an inversion linguistically created; yet, it must be maintained on the level of linguistic expression, in order to indicate, on this level, that the inversions created and concealed by linguistic expression are nothing but inversions. I call this self-referential function of emptiness �contradiction in performance', since it is inclined to incessantly express that what is inexpressible. Exactly in this manner, emptiness unfolds its soteriological significance according to the Buddhist practice of transforming human existence, which I try to show in the last part of this section.

Buddhists, of course, do realize that hinting at the falseness of linguistic expression by means of linguistic expression involves a contradiction within the doctrine of emptiness. However, for Buddhists, this does not signify incoherence of the Buddhist terminology to such a degree that it looses its soteriological significance. The �contradiction in performance' rather marks that moment of realization in which inversions, created and concealed through linguistic expression, reveal themselves as inversions on this level of linguistic expression. �Emptiness' as the real mark of �things existing' must expose the falseness of its expression. This self-reference of emptiness involves contradiction on the linguistic level. However, at this juncture, it may induce awareness in our linguistic acts that that level constantly conceals the inversions it creates. �Emptiness' must be exposed as a contradiction on the level of linguistic expression in order to accomplish its meaning of the real mark, which, with regard to this awareness, unfolds its soteriological significance. The contradiction here signifies exactly the moment in which we may realize that our linguistic habits must be modified if we want to be released from the unwholesome influence of these inversions.

For Buddhists, transformation of our existence primarily concerns the referential approach to our existential habitat. This transformation, of course, is closely bound up with our linguistic habits modified through the awareness regarding the inversions created by linguistic reference. Moreover, such awareness or realization affects not only our linguistic habits but also our evaluation of language itself, which both must, now, become ambiguous, because performing this insight includes realizing its simultaneous indivisibility from falseness. In terms of the evaluation of language, ambiguity implies that linguistic expression is, on the one hand, the root of falseness entailing the unwholesome experience of our existence; on the other hand, linguistic habits with an ostentatious tendency to ambiguity seem to provide the key disclosing the wholesome in the Buddhist practice of transformation. An early advocate of this viewpoint in Chinese Buddhism is Sengzhao who highlights the ambiguity in the Buddhist evaluation of language by emphasizing the �words of the sacred.' The sacred dismisses a univocal mode of linguistic expression; his words are ambiguous and, as Sengzhao explains, defy the norms of the conventional:

"*Speeches about the real defy the norms of the conventional; following the norms of the conventional contradicts the real. Contradicting the real entails irreversible delusion; defying the norms of the conventional evokes lack of interest. [�] In spite of discrepancies within the articulation of the teaching, the teaching itself is not incoherent. Truly, only the words of the sacred may be like this!* � Sengzhao contrasts the sacred with the conventional in reference to their modes of linguistic expression, which also represents his ambiguous evaluation of language. He resorts

to the Buddhist distinction of the �two truths' encompassing the �conventional level' and the �real' or �ultimate level'. The interrelation between the two levels involves the contradiction between the expressible and inexpressible, which became a major subject matter in the debates between the diverse Chinese Buddhist schools during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries.

Some Buddhist scriptures from India or at least single sections in them � like some parts of the *Vimalakirtinidesa Sutra* and *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* � seem to deem silence higher than verbal articulation, as it is believed that this may exemplify the insight into emptiness or ultimate level in the most appropriate way. However, this standpoint is not shared by the majority of Chinese Buddhist thinkers, who would argue � like Zhiyi � that silence embodies a referential act much the same as verbal articulation does:

"*If we regard verbal articulation and silence as rivals, we do not understand the meaning of the teaching. [�]. If we regard texts as harmful, we should realize that texts [=Buddhist scriptures] are not texts. A [certain] text understood means being neither text nor non-text any more. Being able to achieve all the different types of understanding only by one single text, this is the very meaning here.*� This passage may exemplify to what degree, according to the Tiantai-school, the univocal mode of linguistic expression must be abandoned, in order to realize the insight which emptiness is supposed to induce. Both the univocal mode of linguistic expression and its opposite � the exclusive preference for silence � equals the attachments to inversions. This ambiguous evaluation of language mirrors the ambiguous character of inversions � on the one hand, the unwholesome side of inversions, once we become attached to them; and, on the other, their wholesome side, once we have learned to realize their value of inverse instruction.

After achieving this point of awareness, falseness and inversions, eventually, are not any longer considered to be exclusively negative, since they are recognized as inverse instruction completely embodying the positive value of the wholesome. Viewed from that standpoint, many Chinese Buddhists agree with Nagarjuna's statement that there is nothing that can be univocally called inversion.

   5.   Ambiguity on the Level of Composition

From the preceding discussion, we may realize finally that Buddhist texts expanding on the speculative issue of emptiness pursue the practical goal of transformation rather than establishing a descriptive view of reality. For speculative reflections on emptiness must become self-referential and therefore prescriptive with regard to the linguistic expression involved. This concerns directly the compositional pattern of Buddhist texts. Hence, Zhiyi reminds us that �Buddhist texts are not texts', as their terminology consists of linguistic constructions provisionally required for deconstructing our attachments to the inversions linguistically created. This also implies that the deconstructive function of a Buddhist text must even apply to the text exemplifying it. A Buddhist text understood properly is not a text any more. Practice of transformation implies that the text must be, finally, abandoned, after it has fulfilled its provisional purpose. However, if we regard its

provisional constructions as apodictic statements or ultimate judgments, we just fall prey to attachments again; and Buddhist texts, not different from the objects of their refutations, may even obstruct the course of transformation and unfold unwholesome effects.

Therefore, the compositional features of a Buddhist text should be designed in a manner according to which the reader � whom the author addresses as a potential practitioner � does not become liable to attachments again. The significance of its compositional pattern prescribes that this text should never be treated as a manifest of apodictic statements; and for this purpose it may defy the conventional norms of a univocal mode of expression.

According to Zhiyi and many other Chinese Buddhist authors, a text should tend to incorporate the insights about the functioning of emptiness into its compositional design. By virtue of the compositional means, Buddhist texts are intended to perform an exemplifying role within the Buddhist practice of transforming human existence. Here, the speculative content of emptiness directly affects the compositional pattern of its textual form, which, as an integral part of Buddhist soteriology, consummates this practical concern of transformation.

Most of the compositional patterns, which Buddhist authors designed, manifest the specific characteristic of ambiguity defying the conventional norms of univocal linguistic expression. This is true of Chinese Mahāyāna texts composed by authors of the Tiantai, Huayan, Sanlun and Yogacara school. The subsequent section introduces some selections from Tiantai, Huayan and Yogacara texts displaying the characteristic of ambiguity in their compositional patterns.

My first example is a passage from the Chinese version of the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (*jieshenmi jing*). Among the diverse Chinese and Tibetan translations, I chose the one from the famous pilgrim and translator Xuanzang of the early Tang dynasty (seventh to ninth century). This Sutra is generally regarded as one of the early Yogacara texts whose Sanskrit version does not exist any more.

The third chapter of it scrutinizes the �marks of the mind, intentions and consciousness.' It begins with the introduction and exposition of a Chinese expression called �*the Bodhisattva skillfully mastering [=understanding] the unfathomable secrets of the mind, intentions and consciousness.*' The characterization of �unfathomable secrets' refers to a level of consciousness, of which the consciousness of our sense faculties and our intentional consciousness are unaware, and compared to which those faculties and intentions only constitute the surface layer in the whole complex of consciousness, since it is the very source of them and all the objects they refer to � in short, the source of any item pertaining to our existential habitat.

A more technical term of this layer underlying all apparitions, which we count to our existential habitat, is the so called �*alaya*-consciousness' and �*adana*-consciousness.' The first is often referred to as a �storehouse', since, as a source of all apparitions, it potentially stores them, whereas the second refers to the ground of attachment based on which we ascribe continuation and duration to all the apparitions perceived on the surface layer. The �unfathomable secret' or �underlying layer' is a kind of virtual memory for all the untrue apparitions and inversions actualized on the surface layer. This terminology, moreover, explains the delusive impressions we have in terms of the false duration regarding our own existence or that of other things; and in terms

of an existing world illusorily assumed to be external to our consciousness etc. The subsequent part also expounds briefly that the two layers of consciousness mutually shape each other; untrue apparitions and inversions on the surface layer shape impressions stored by the virtual layer, whereas the virtual layer gives rise to further inversions and apparitions actualized on the surface level; the two of them are constantly changing due to the shaping dynamism between them.

However, at the end of this chapter occurs the turning point; the last passage says that the �Boddhisattva skillfully mastering the unfathomable secrets' does not deserve to be called as such, as long as he still recognizes all these things previously described. Only if he � based on his deeper understanding of these things described � learns not to identify them anymore, is he worthy of being called a �*Bodhisattva of supreme skills*' equaling the �*Boddhisattva skillfully mastering the unfathomable secret*.' The notion about the ultimate source of our illusions is deemed to be provisionally indispensable, in order to thoroughly realize that the views and understanding tied to the surface layer of our consciousness cannot escape this illusoriness. However, only if we also realize that the way we look at this source does not go beyond this illusory level of consciousness either, does this realization deserve to be called �accomplished.'

The compositional pattern of this text is obviously ambiguous; first, this text posits or affirms the viewpoint about an ultimate source of delusions; then the text proceeds to unfold the conception of it, but only for the purpose of finally abandoning it. The subsequent chapter of this Sutra repeats the same compositional scheme with another subject matter and its corresponding terminology.

Another example of a compositional scheme designed in an ambiguous manner is a short text representing the ideas of the Chinese Huayan school. It is called *Huayan Fajie Xuanjing* attributed to the inaugurator of this school called Dushun (576-638). The initial section deals with the notion of �true emptiness' and its antonymous relationship to that of �distinctive form.' It tries to prove that �form' must be reduced to its antonym �emptiness' as much as �emptiness' must be elucidated as �form'. It turns out that the two are �*neither identical nor different*', �*neither divisible nor indivisible*' from each other. �*Emptiness and form do not obstruct each other*' for a twofold reason: first, �*distinctive form is not emptiness, since form is indivisible from emptiness*'; second, �*emptiness is not distinctive form, since emptiness is indivisible from form*'. The idea behind this is, as previously expounded, the dialectical interplay between construction and deconstruction in Buddhist texts; deconstruction in these texts requires construction, though constructions are supposed to be deconstructed.

The last example which I would like to introduce in my paper is drawn from a Tiantai text ascribed to Zhiyi. Here, the author plays with the ambiguity of the Chinese language. Besides the semantic ambiguity of Chinese characters, no grammatical modifier is attached to the words in a sentence; moreover, the word class and grammatical function of a character or word solely depends on the syntactical context, which in turn is not univocally determined due to the absence of orthographical symbols. The grammatically indeterminate features of the Classical Chinese may support the ambiguous mode of linguistic expression in Buddhist texts as it becomes particularly evident in the passage quoted below.

The issue in question, here, is the Buddhist term �*dharma-realm*' which Zhiyi explains according to the pattern of the �threefold truth' displaying the simultaneity of �emptiness, the provisional

and the middle'; each of the three embodies all of them. The technical term *dharma-realm* could be understood as the existential habitat shared by all sentient beings including the Buddha, other sacred beings and all types of ignorant beings. All types of sentient beings are subdivided into ten groups, four of which represent the sacred realms, whereas the other six encompass the profane realms of the ignorant beings. Accordingly, this existential habitat shared by all sentient beings is experienced and referred to in ten different ways due to the respective group of sentient beings. Tiantai Buddhist use the term �tenfold dharma-realm' to signify that meaning. Furthermore, as previously stated, the tenfold dharma-realm or the existential habitat shared by all sentient beings is ontologically indeterminate, which Zhiyi tries to indicate through his interpretation according to the threefold truth:

"'Dharma-realm' embodies a threefold meaning [emptiness, provisional and middle]: [first], the number �ten' points to that which is potentially dependent [=the provisional], [second], �dharma-realm' refers to that based on which it is grounded [=emptiness], and [third], the combined designation for the potency [of dependence] and its ground is, therefore, called �tenfold dharma-realm' [=the middle]. Again, each of the ten groups obtains its respective pattern of causes and fruits which are never intermixed, therefore, it is called the �ten dharma-realms.' Again, if, within the range of these ten groups, one after another becomes the respective embodiment, [each of] it is just dharma-realm, and, therefore, it is called [this] �realm ten times.'�

Here, the �provisional' represents the �number ten pointing to that which is potentially dependent' � in other words, the diversity of our existential habitat, whereas �emptiness' embodies �that based on which the provisional (= �ten' or diversity of existence) is grounded'. The point in this section may become more evident, if we relate it to a statement from Kumārajīva's translation of Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Middle*: "*Since there is the meaning of emptiness, all things [arising and perishing] can be established.*� As things existing are both impermanent and based on dependent origination, they are devoid of self-sustaining reality, which is indicated through the expression �emptiness'. Conversely, if �emptiness' is not presupposed as necessary, things existing would neither arise nor perish, that is neither be dependent nor be impermanent. Consequently, �emptiness' is the foundation based on which the �provisional', that is diversity of our existential habitat arises and perishes.

The �provisional' represents diversity indicated through the number �ten', and �emptiness' points to its foundation denoted by the term �dharma-realm'. Fundamentally, each of the ten different groups embodies the �dharma-realm' equally, which outlines the indivisibility between �emptiness' and the �provisional' diversified � the fundamental meaning of the �middle' called �tenfold dharma-realm'. The three aspects are interchangeable, which means each aspect embodies all of the three. However only, the �provisional' level enables the verbalization of this interchangeability, since �emptiness' deconstructs the reference to things falsely presumed to be real in linguistic expression � the self-referential function of �emptiness' also points out that there is no real thing like �emptiness' that can be linguistically referred to; paradoxically, �emptiness' expressing this must be ultimately inexpressible.

In spite of this inexpressibility, the verbalization of the �threefold truth' is necessary, to enforce the deconstructive function of �emptiness', otherwise �emptiness' would ultimately mean nothingness. For that reason, Zhiyi also explains that, in enacting the soteriological function of the teaching of the Buddha-dharma, there is as much construction while deconstructing as there is deconstruction while constructing. Viewed from the level of the �provisional', the interchangeability of the three aspects can be verbalized, as soon as we find an expression ambiguous enough simultaneously exemplifying �emptiness', the �provisional' and the �middle'. This exactly is what Zhiyi tries to point out with his exploration of the expression �tenfold dharma-realm'.

The ambiguity of the Chinese term �*shifajie*' (=tenfold dharma-realm) is such that it could be understood as both the single yet �tenfold dharma-realm' and on the other side the �ten [different] dharma-realms'; the first reading of a singular would represent the viewpoint of �emptiness' and the �middle', whereas the second of a plural hints at the �provisional' diversified. Dharma-realm provisionally diversified into ten different levels of existence is ultimately emptiness, and due to the interdependence between the provisional diversified and its ultimate emptiness, the entire expression �tenfold dharma-realm' simultaneously exemplifies the �middle' and �emptiness' on this level of �provisional verbalization'.

Also, the opposition between the expressible and inexpressible provisionally shaped on the level of linguistic expression must disappear due to �emptiness' being provisionally indicated. Since the ambiguous expression �ten(fold) dharma-realm(s)' is supposed to exemplify the simultaneity of �emptiness', the �provisional' and the �middle', it provisionally verbalizes the function of �emptiness', though its deconstructive functioning must remain ultimately inexpressible. This exemplification of the �threefold truth' by means of the ambiguous expression �ten(fold) dharma-realm(s)' is intended to transcend the opposition between the verbalized and inexpressible, since the level of provisional verbalization which inversely embodies the function of emptiness exposes this �opposition' as provisionally designed but not ultimately real � as this opposition is provisionally designed, it can be also provisionally transcended by means of linguistic ambiguity exemplifying simultaneity of emptiness, the provisional and the middle.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to demonstrate to what extent speculative reflection concerning the doctrine of emptiness involves a mode of ambiguous expression, which in turn is intended to consummate the Buddhist practice of transforming human existence. I also presented examples which illustrate the way Chinese authors of Buddhist texts utilized the characteristic features of Classical Chinese in order to promote this type of linguistic expression.

The doctrine of emptiness in various Mahayana teachings, generally, points out that we disclose our existential habitat linguistically and that, however, this must involve an illusory relationship

to that existential habitat. Due to the teaching of emptiness, one must also realize that emptiness is self-referential, which unfolds a contradiction in performance on the level of linguistic expression: we linguistically point to the falseness of linguistic expression. However, such contradiction can be interpreted in a soteriological sense; that is it induces awareness of that falseness which our referential acts necessarily conceal. Consequently, the ambiguous expression in Buddhist teachings expanding on the doctrine of emptiness does not intend to be a language used for describing reality, but to function as a means in the Buddhist practice of transformation.