

Language and Practice From the Buddhist Perspective: Based on the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras*

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Having traveled through four gates of the palace, Śākyamuni became a *śramaṇa* to seek the solution for mankind's "birth, aging, sickness, and death". Finally, he found the truth—the ineffable reality of the world. To expound the truth to people, he had to use the linguistic convention to express the inexpressible state. The primary purpose of this paper is to use the Buddhist perspective on language based on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, to compare the daily language in the world—especially linguistics and philosophy of language in academia; hence point out their limitations, defect, or pitfalls, to see the crux of the language problem, and turn to the path of Buddhist practicing as well as "bringing wisdom from knowledge". I will elaborate on six points in full text: I. Introduction, including the five key concepts. II. The comparison of the Buddhist perspective on language with linguistics and philosophy of language. III. The perspective of the language in the *4th, 7th & 16th assemblies*. IV. To understand the reality of the world, we have to cultivate the "hearing, contemplating, and practicing" based on Buddha's words. V. The significance of the Buddhist perspective on language in this era. VI. Conclusion.

Keywords: *dharma* (the related factors), *prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom), *prajñapti* (the conventional facility), the reality of the world, ineffability or inexpressibility

Introduction

This paper mainly introduces the Buddhist perspective on language based on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, which is very different from the academic analysis of language in linguistics and philosophy of language. Six main points will be elaborated on as follows: I. In the introduction, the five key concepts related to Buddhist linguistic insights in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* are defined, and concise explanations are given first, so that readers will have a preliminary understanding and be easily guided into the perspective of language in the context of Buddhist teachings. II. I compare the Buddhist perspective on language with linguistics and philosophy of language, so that the difference can be grasped initially. III. The perspective of the language in the *4th, 7th & 16th assemblies*¹ of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* shows that language is just a conventional facility in pedagogical expression—belonging to *saṃvṛti-satya*, and the real state or the reality of the world is

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¹ There are 16 assemblies in *Mohe bore boluomiduo jing (Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra)*. T. 5-7, No. 220 (1-16). Xuan-zang (Tr.). This is the most extensive and complete version of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*. In addition, the *4th Assembly* is equal to *Aṣṭasahasrikā prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*; the *7th Assembly* is equal to *vajra-cchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*; the *16th Assembly* is equal to *Śikrāntavikrāmi-pari-pṛechā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Ps: The abbreviation "T." means *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai).

ineffable (or inexpressible)—belonging to *paramârtha-satya*. IV. If we want to thoroughly understand the reality of the world, language (Buddha’s words) alone is not enough. We have to cultivate the “hearing, contemplating, and practicing” or the “precepts, calm abiding (meditative serenity), and wisdom”² in the path of liberation or the “ten *pāramitā*” in the path of supreme bodhi. V. At the end of the discussion, the significance of the Buddhist perspective on language in this era will be presented. VI. Conclusion—a brief summary.

The following five key concepts need to be defined and clarified in order to better understand and communicate the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

(1) *Dharma*: The Sanskrit “*dharma*” is a masculine noun derived from the verbal root $\sqrt{dhṛ}$ (to hold). It is an ambiguous word³ and basically means “related factors” in this paper, following the context of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*. Frequently, the pronominal adjective “*sarva*” (all) is added in front of it to become a plural compound word, “*sarva-dharmāḥ*” (all dharmas). Treating them as the first object to observe, we may uncover or unfold them into “related factors” in the light of the perspective of “*pratītya-samutpāda* (conditioned co-arising or dependent co-arising) & *sūnyatā* (emptiness; the absence of inherent existence)”. Besides, “*sarva-dharmāḥ*” in the first place means *pañca skandhas* (five aggregates)—*rūpa* (form), *vedanā* (feeling), *saṃjñā* (conception), *saṃskāra* (compositional factors in mind), and *vijñāna* (differentiating cognition or perception/consciousness).⁴

(2) *Prajñāpāramitā*: The Sanskrit compound feminine noun “*prajñāpāramitā*”, equal to *prajñā* combined with *pāramitā*, is one of the core concepts of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*. The former (*prajñā*) means “insightful wisdom or penetrating wisdom” that is based on the contemplation of the dependent-arising and emptiness on all dharmas; the latter (*pāramitā*), founded on the former, extends to different aspects and dimensions, such as time, space, number, measurement, boundary, bourn, other aspects, and so on, and finally carries the wisdom through to completion. In other words, it means “reach to the extreme in wisdom” or “endless and thorough understanding”. In this paper, I will translate “*prajñāpāramitā*” into “the perfection of wisdom” in English (Conze, 1993a, p. 17). In fact, whatever the world is, the *prajñāpāramitā* is so, and vice versa. The world is infinite, countless, and boundless, then the *prajñāpāramitā* is also infinite, countless, and boundless, and vice versa. Therefore, “*prajñāpāramitā*” is quite different from the bound cognition and limited knowledge in the world.⁵

(3) *Prajñapti*: The Sanskrit “*prajñapti*” is a feminine noun, which is derived from the causative form of the verbal root $\sqrt{jñā}$ (to cognize) combined with a prefix “*pra-*” (towards). It could implicitly mean “let others

² Please note: “hearing, contemplating, and practicing” and “precept, calm abiding (meditative serenity), and wisdom” both mean the same following the context of Buddhist teachings.

³ “*Dharma*” can be explained from different angles: (1) In general, “*dharma*” frequently means “doctrine”; (2) In terms of ethics and morality, “behaviors complied with the *dharma*” are ethical behaviors. In the Buddhist teachings, these are agreed with the three virtuous karmas of body, speech and mind or the five precepts & 10 virtues. Contrary to the previous, “behaviors not complied with the *dharma*” are opposite to the above-mentioned; (3) As far as secular laws are concerned, those that comply with the laws and regulations of the country and society are considered “legal” (= obey the dharma), and vice versa, they are considered “illegal or illegal” (= not obey the dharma); and (4) As far as other applications in Buddhism are concerned, e.g., “*abhi-dharma*” distinguishes all dharmas into five 75 or hundred items, this is mainly a concept based on the epistemological analysis of the composition or essence of all phenomena. For a related explanation in detail, please refer to Wilson (1992, p. 722).

⁴ In addition to *pañca skandhas* (five aggregates), it also includes *dvādaśāyatanāni* (12 perceptual gates) and *aṣṭāśadhātavaḥ* (18 perceptual elements), see, e.g., Kimura (1990), p. 58. Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (2), 225b; Conze (1975a), p. 346, also see Tsai (2020), p. 44.

⁵ About the meaning of the *prajñāpāramitā*, please refer to Tsai (2020), pp. 42-44).

know by means of language”, or more clearly “through language as a stopgap-tool, let other people understand the meaning that is expressed”. In this paper, this word translates into “conventional facility”. Thus, one speaks of a “name” with reference to a merely nominal entity, and we may know that it is just a conventional expression. By the way, because this word often appears in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* and even other Buddhist scriptures, so we may know its importance. It should be deduced that “language” is just a guiding stopgap tool for temporary transition. The more important thing is to witness the state or realm of enlightenment through personal practice in “precept, calm abiding (meditative serenity),⁶ and wisdom”.

(4) Reality: The “reality” in the context of Buddhist teachings is quite different from the “reality” in the context of ordinary people’s cognition in this world. The latter emphasizes verifiability and authenticity; the former means: (1) the state/nature of related factors and activities as they really are, as opposed to conceptual construction or emotional grasp of them, and (2) the totality of related factors and activities, including whatever happens, has happened, and will happen, as opposed to spatially and temporally limited phenomena (Tsai, 2020). Accordingly, the reality of the world should be ineffable (or inexpressible). In other words, the reality cannot be contained in the speech by verbal expressions (*na śakyā vācā vaktum*) (Hikata, 1958; Vaidya, 1961; Conze, 1993a). In a nutshell, the reality of the world is not related to concepts and beyond words.

(5) Ineffability (Inexpressibility): According to the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, the related factors or composed elements of all things or phenomena, the conditions that drive all these things or phenomena to change, the whole involved context behind them, and what their future trends are, etc., are ineffable (or inexpressible) under one’s observing as-it-is, then the concept of “ineffability (or inexpressibility)” —even if you say something, it can’t be said accurately—will come out. In addition to the above, suppose you explore something or a phenomenon into a deeper part and thus reach to the fundamental level—the reality of the world/the nature of dharma (*dharma-tā*)/the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*)/the ineffable realm or inconceivable (*acintya-dhātu*),⁷ which is non-conceptual and inexpressible. In that case, it is ineffable (or inexpressible) in the sense that there is a tremendous gap between “the expressing action” and “to be expressed in reality” (Knepper, 2007, pp. 1-8; Kukla, 2005, pp. 1-51). Therefore, this highly differs from the religious theology, mathematical sciences, or cognitive sciences in academia (Bennett-Hunter, 2015; Kukla, 2005).

After defining and clarifying key concepts, e.g., *dharma*, *prajñāpāramitā*, *prajñapti*, reality, and ineffability (or inexpressibility), next this paper moves to explore the perspective of the language in the context of Buddhist teachings.

The comparison of the Buddhist perspective on language with linguistics and philosophy of language

The perspective of the language in the context of Buddhist teachings is very different from linguistics or philosophy of language. The former emphasizes that language, as a pedagogical tool for the soteriological purpose, is just a conventional facility in expression, and the real state/the reality of the world is ineffable or

⁶ Calm abiding/meditative serenity, *śamatha*, is generally defined as “focusing one’s attention on an appropriate object or a correct referent so that the mind stabilizes one-pointedly continuously”, see, e.g., Cutler and Newland (2002, pp. 15-19).

⁷ The *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* also include thusness or suchness (*tathatā*), without deviation from suchness or unmistaken suchness (*an-anya-tathatā*), the realm of dharma (*dharma-dhātu*), the state/nature of the abiding of dharma (*dharma-sthititā*), the certainty of dharma (*dharma-niyāmatā*), the furthest limit of existence or limit of reality (*bhūta-koti*), and so on and so forth, see, e.g., Kimura (1990), p. 76. Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (2), 236c; Conze (1975a, p. 357), also see Tsai (2014, pp. 8-9; 2020, p. 46).

inconceivable; the latter's linguistics says that "language, based on arbitrary,⁸ a kind of conventional system symbols or sounds, are people's autonomous and conscious behaviors and social behaviors related to culture".⁹ Furthermore, concerning philosophy of language, those propositions, based on language, are all referential, and they have cognitive significance only if they are directly or indirectly confirmed by experience.¹⁰

Why is there such a big difference? The worldview established by the Buddhist teachings is very different from the worldview of ordinary people. What the goal of Buddha and his disciples aim to is "transcending the suffering of birth, aging, sickness and death in *samsāra* (the cycle of successive existence or the wheel of life)". Nonetheless, what ordinary people want to pursue is "living well in real life, that is to say, living safely, comfortably, happily and with dignity". Because of the different worldview, the established patterns of the worldview are incredibly diverse; hence the two views on language are also highly different.

The Buddhist teachings originated from Śākyamuni, the sage of the Śākyas (566-486).¹¹ When he was a prince, Siddhārtha Gautama had traveled through four gates of the royal palace. After seeing through the birth, aging, sickness, and death of human life, the young successor to the throne was no longer obsessed with world experience, and resolutely decided to become a *śramaṇa* (an ascetic or one who strives)¹² exert himself to try to seek the answer. Eventually, he achieved the *samyak-saṃbodhi* (full complete awakening) and realized the reality of the world. In order to tell the people in the world about the realm of his enlightenment, the only way to reveal the statement is by employing language. Even though the realm/state from his teachings still needs to be expressed through words, the actual realm/state of enlightenment is not so as the language says.¹³ As a matter of fact, this realm/state needs to rely on the hearers themselves to practice the first-hand experience. For example, when Śākyamuni attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he said "This profound dharma that I have found is peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise". Since it is so difficult to see and hard to understand for ordinary people, full of attachment/desire, hatred/anger, and delusion/ignorance, Śākyamuni Buddha was inclined not to teach initially. However, great compassion sage still needed to benefit all sentient beings, so he used the language as a pedagogical tool to teach humans and non-humans for soteriological purpose.¹⁴ That is why "*prajñapti*" (conventional facility)—through language as a stopgap-tool, to let others understand the meaning that is expressed—is frequently used in Buddhist scriptures, especially the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*. After hearing, con-templating, and practicing as well as cultivating in precept, calm abiding (meditative serenity), and wisdom, eventually the practitioners can achieve or attain the ineffable reality of the world by themselves.

⁸ The relationship between speech sounds and the meanings they represent is, for the most part, an arbitrary one. But there are some exceptions, such as onomatopoeic words, see Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams (2014, pp. 3-4).

⁹ The creativity of linguistic knowledge: Languages can also produce and understand new sentences never spoken before, see Fromkin et al. (2014, pp. 5, 1-27).

¹⁰ In philosophy of language, such as the referential theory, empirical viewpoints please refer to see e.g., Lee (2020, pp. 8-16, 49-60); Lycan (2008, pp. 1, 3-6, 9-12, 65, 71, 83); & Martinich (1996, pp. 1-9).

¹¹ There are many sayings about the age of the Buddha's existence in academia. This paper is based on the tradition—recorded in the Pali sources of southern Buddhism, that the great Mauryan king, Aśoka, was consecrated 218 years after the death of the Buddha, and, secondly, taking 268 BCE as the year of Aśoka's accession. Please refer to Gethin (1998, pp. 13-14).

¹² This term means literally "one who strives" and belongs to the technical vocabulary of Indian religion, referring as it does to "one who strives" religiously or spiritually, see Gethin (1998, p. 9).

¹³ *Na punar yathōcyate ththā taj jñānam* (but again, transcendental wisdom is not so as I [Buddha] speak of it) (my own translation), Hikata (1958, p. 8); Vaidya (1961, p. 4). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (16), 1068a; Conze (1993a, p. 19).

¹⁴ This point shows the realm that Śākyamuni achieved or attained is ineffable (or inexpressible), i.e., not expressible in words, see e.g., Gethin (1998, p. 24); & Burton (2004, pp. 142-147).

The Buddhist Perspective of the Language on *Samvṛti-Satya* and *Paramârtha-Satya* according to the 4th, 9th & 16th Assemblies

According to *the 4th Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, one of the meanings of the “*prajñāpāramitā*” (the perfection of wisdom) is elucidated from the following passage:

At that time, the Venerable *Subhūti* said to *Bhagavān*: “*Bhagavan!* The so-called “*prajñāpāramitā*” is merely a name, and it is “this name”—being all said to be “the name of the speech,” which cannot be got at. There is also no this “*prajñāpāramitā*” that can be found, and it is unobtainable. Just follows the name, then follows the *prajñāpāramitā*; just follows the *prajñāpāramitā*, then follows the name.¹⁵ Dichotomy/duality related to any dharma does not exist and is unable to be caught”. (my own translation)¹⁶

The gist of the above passage: The name, “*prajñāpāramitā*”, is not equal to the reality of the dharmas. “*Prajñāpāramitā*”—“the perfection of wisdom”—comes from “*prajñā*” (insightful wisdom or penetrating wisdom,) which observes the composed elements of the dharmas and the conditions that promote their changes, then realizes their emptiness and selflessness. Language is just like a pedagogical tool for the soteriological purpose, through which one can accomplish one’s own wish or ideal. So, we should be aware that language has its limitations, and it even makes us fall into a pitfall easily. This point can be referred to the following passage from *the 9th Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, as follows:

And why? *Subhūti!* Actually, it is because that a *Bodhisattva* should seize on neither a dharma nor a not-dharma. Therefore, this saying has been taught by the *Tathagata* with a hidden meaning: “Those who know the discourse on dharma as like unto a raft should forsake dharmas, still more so non-dharmas”.¹⁷

The gist of the above passage: This discourse mentions “the raft simile (*kolôpama*)”¹⁸—a *dharma* is like a boat or floating platform to cross the river, and after reaching the other side, it does not need to be carried ashore. Through the linguistic description about affirmative/non-affirmative or existing/non-existing related to a *dharma* (neither a dharma nor a not-dharma) (Tsai, 2014, pp. 14-18), we should know that we have already grasped something subconsciously or assumptively. As it is, it is not as just said in the level of the reality to this *dharma*. Consequently, *prajñāpāramitā* cannot merely be established just by speaking or writing; the perfection of wisdom should be pursued in practice. In the meanwhile, we also need to know that the operational framework of the two truths (*satya-dvaya*) incorporates both the reality of the word and linguistic convention in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* (Kimura, 2009; Conze, 1975a; Tsai, 2020). The Buddha set up the two truths—the truth (manifested) in linguistic convention (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and the truth (manifested) in the utmost meaning (*paramârtha-satya*)¹⁹—to guide sentient beings toward liberation; hence they can be regarded as a kind of

¹⁵ Cf. Conze (1975b, p. 149) as follows, “In so far as it is a word, in so far as it is perfect wisdom; in so far as it is perfect wisdom, in so far as it is a word”.

¹⁶ “Atha khalv āyuṣmān Subhūtir Bhagavantam etad avocat: Prajñāpāramitēti Bhagavan nāmadheya-mātram etat. tac ca nāmēdam iti nōpalabhyate vāg-vastv eva nāmēty ucyate. sā ’pi prajñāpāramitā na vidyate nōpalabhyate yathaiva nāma, tathaiva prajñāpāramitā; yathā prajñāpāramitā tathā nāma. dharmadvyam etan na vidyate nōpalabhyate” (Wogihara, 1932, p. 435). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (4), 804a; & Conze (1975b, pp. 26, 149).

¹⁷ “Tat kasya hetoḥ? na khalu punaḥ subhūte bodhisattvena mahāsattvena dharmā udgrahītavyo nādharmāḥ/tasmād iyaṃ tathāgatena saṃdhāya vāg bhāṣitā: kolopamaṃ dharmā paryāyam ājānadbhir dharmā eva prahātavyāḥ prāg evādharmā iti” (Vaidya, 1961, p. 77). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (9), 980c; & Conze (1993b, p. 151).

¹⁸ For related discussion, please refer to Tsai (2014, pp. 18-21).

¹⁹ Here, translating *paramârtha-satya* into the truth (manifested) in the utmost meaning instead of the ultimate truth, because the latter will show cleavage or division finally, while the former will not. In addition, the concept of the utmost meaning (*paramârtha*) suggests that what matters most is a consistent unravelling and understanding of the meaning (*artha*) to the utmost extent possible (*parama*), rather than grasping the object as an entity.

pedagogical strategy (Tsai, 2020, pp. 48-53). Therein, three main points should be noticed: (1) *saṃvṛti-satyā* and *paramārtha-satyā* cannot be split, which means the linguistic convention and the utmost meaning are not separated from each other. (2) The linguistic convention has to do with various distinctions; the utmost meaning manifests non-dividedness. And (3) everything that is said belongs to the linguistic convention, including Buddha's words, and the truth (manifested) in the utmost meaning (i.e., the reality of the world) is ineffable/inexpressible; so if we want to achieve the state of liberation or enlightenment, we can only rely on practice.

Buddhist Perspective on Language Is Furthermore to Guide the Followers Toward Personal Practice.

Next, we should know that the *prajñāpāramitā* functions as the revelation of the reality of the world, which can be seen in some passage from *the 4th Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, as follows:

What is the reason? Because she (the perfection of wisdom) is the mother-genetrix of Tathāgata-Arhat-Samyaksambuddha, the display of that “all-knowledge”, and demonstration of the world (for what it is). (my own translation)²⁰

The gist of the above passage: The *prajñāpāramitā* is not only the mother-genetrix (*mātā janayitrī*) of Tathāgata by contributing the indispensable qualities powers to the achievement of the Tathāgata's enlightenment, and she is also the instructress of this world by instructing or demonstrating what is the reality of the world (Tsai, 2020). So, we may get four conclusions of: (1) the *prajñāpāramitā* who is all Buddhas' mother; (2) the *prajñāpāramitā* as the realization of the reality of the world; (3) the revelation of the reality of the world to the Tathāgata through the *prajñāpāramitā*; and (4) the Tathāgata's proclamation of the reality of the world as ineffable (or inexpressible) along with such extraordinary utterances as empty and even ultimately empty.²¹

In this meaning of the ineffability (or inexpressibility), we can see that there is a tremendous gap between “the expressing action” and “to be expressed in reality”. And why? That is because language is just a conventional facility in expression, and the real state or the reality of the world is ineffable (or inexpressible), which predominantly means the reality of the world can only be personally witnessed by the real cultivation of hearing, contemplating, and practicing or precept, calm abiding (meditative serenity), and wisdom. This can be seen more clearly from *the 16th Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*,²² as follows:

Suvikrāntavikrāmin! Moreover, the “the perfection of wisdom” that is the other shore of all dharmas, whether they be objects of cognition or deeds; it is in that sense that one speaks of “the perfection of wisdom”; but again it is not so as one speaks of it. For the perfection of wisdom has not been set up by speech or by deed, and that is why it cannot be elucidated.²³

²⁰ “Tat kasya hetoḥ? eṣā hi mātā janayitrī tathāgatānām arhatāṃ samyak-sambuddhānām. asyāḥ sarvajñatāyā darśayitrī lokasya ca saṃdarśayitrī atonirjātā hi subhūte tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyak-sambuddhāḥ” (Wogihara, 1932, p. 531). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (4), 814b; & Conze (1975b, p. 31).

²¹ For the above doctrine, please refer to: “punar aparāṃ subhūte prajñāpāramitā tathāgatasya lokāḥ śūnya itī darśayati”. “Punar aparāṃ subhūte prajñāpāramitā tathāgatasya loko 'cintya itī darśayati. ... evaṃ vivikta itī, atyanta-śūnya itī, svabhāvaśūnya itī darśayati”. “punar aparāṃ subhūte prajñā-pāramitā tathāgatasya lokāḥ śānta itī darśayati”. “Punar aparāṃ subhūte prajñāpāramitā tathāgata-sya lokāḥ śūnyataivēti darśayati” (Kimura, 1990, p. 73). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (2), 234b-235a; Conze (1975a, pp. 355-356); also see Tsai (2020, p. 44).

²² *The 16th Assembly of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* is also named “The Questions of Suvikrānta-vikrāmin”, see Conze (1993a, pp. 14-101).

²³ “Api tu Suvikrāntavikrāmin prajñāpāramitēti pāram etat sarvadharmāṇāṃ jñānakarmaṇāṃ tenōcyate prajñāpāramitēti; na punar yathōcyate. na hi vācā na ca karmaṇā prajñāpāramitā pratyupasthitā, anirdeśyā hi Suvikrāntavikrāmin prajñāpāramitā” (Hikata, 1958, p. 13); the English translation mainly from Conze (1993a, p. 24). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (16), 1069c.

The main idea of the above passage: The saying—“*na punar yathôcyate* (But again it is not so as one speaks of it)”²⁴—expresses the concept, which removes concealing mask to reveal the reality of the world from the perspective of language. Yet we also know that “*prajñāpāramitā*” is beyond words. Even though there are a lot of sayings about “*prajñāpāramitā*” in Buddhist teachings, actually it is not what it says in the text. Because what we are talking about is the realm of the reality of the world, and we can only personally witness it through practice. Consequently, the Buddhist perspective on language is eventually to guide the disciples or followers toward practice, getting accustomed to the instructions from Buddha’s words. That is to say, the knowledge and perception of human beings are extremely limited, so if we want to thoroughly understand the world, we can only rely on the cultivation of “hearing, contemplating, and practicing” or “precept, calm abiding (meditative serenity), and wisdom”.

In terms of practice, there are many kinds of “hearing, contemplating, and cultivating”—take up this perfection of wisdom, and listen, bear it in mind, recite, study, think truthfully following the doctrine and spread it among people—mentioned in the *prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, for example, the following passage from *the 4th Assembly of the Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtras*:

Whether one wants to train on the level of Disciple (*Śrāvaka*), or Pratyekabuddha, or Bodhisattva,—one should listen to this perfection of wisdom, take it up, bear it in mind, recite it, study it, spread it among others, and in this very perfection of wisdom should one endowed with skill in means exert himself, with the aim of procuring all the dharmas which constitute a Bodhisattva.²⁵

In addition to the above, there are also many emphasizing six perfections (*ṣaṭ pāramitā*)—giving of oneself (*dāna*), ethics or morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), one-pointed concentration (*dhyāna*), insightful wisdom or penetrating wisdom (*prajñā*)—(Wogihara, 1932; Conze, 1975b), to which the connotation of “precept, calm abiding, and wisdom” in the context of the *Māhayāna* are equal.

The Significance of Buddhist Perspective on Language in the Contemporary Era

With regard to the contemporary significance of the Buddhist perspective on language, this paper proposes the following four points of reflection:

1. From the Buddhist perspective on language, we are certainly able to transcend the limitations or defects that are trapped in the “grammatical analysis” of linguistics:

First of all, there are two main types in the model of grammar advocated by linguists: One is “prescriptive grammars”; the other is “descriptive grammars”. The former refers to artificially formulating a grammatical system on the basis of certain language phenomena to guide people to use the language correctly and normatively. The latter pointed out that language should not be used in accordance with the rules set by grammarians, but should be used according to the actual situation of the local people who use the language; if so, people should actively accept language changes (Fromkin et al., 2014). Different from this, the Buddhist perspective on language brings out another view on the usage of language, which is based on the doctrine about “the aggregation of causes and conditions, the promotion of conditions, the absence of inherent existence and

²⁴ This saying totally appears 19 times in *the 16th Assembly* so that we may see its importance.

²⁵ “*Śrāvakabhūmāv api śikṣitukāmena iyaṃ eva prajñā-pāramitā śrotavyā udgrahītavyā dhārayitavyā vācayitavyā paryavāptavyā pravartayitavyā. ihaiva prajñāpāramitāyāṃ śikṣitavyaṃ yogamāpattavyaṃ; pratyekabuddhabhūmāv...; bodhisattvabhūmāv ... ihaiva prajñāpāramitāyāṃ upāya-kauśalya samanvāgatena sarva-bodhisattva-dharma samudāgamāya yogaḥ karaṇīyaḥ*” (Wogihara, 1932, pp. 41-42); the English translation mainly from Conze (1975b, p. 84). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (4), 764a.

free from a fixed self (or not-self; *anātman*)”. For example, when people whose mother language is not English want to learn English, they should adopt “normative grammar” so that they will feel easy to understand and catch it. However, the language of a country or a nation has been increasing and decreasing with time and space, and English is the same. Thus, we do not need to fuss about British English or American English, even Indian, Singaporean, and Malaysian English. As the “Descriptive Grammar” said, with the appropriate adjustments and changes in the region or era, so you can speak English freely everywhere.²⁶

2. From the Buddhist perspective on language, we can easily see the restrictions or faults of the analysis or proposition of “language” in philosophy of language, and go beyond its scope or limitations:

Secondly, extending from linguistics to philosophy of language,²⁷ some philosophers advocate that the ideal language based on formal logic should be used to eliminate the defects of natural language, so that such the philosophy can be certain and verifiable; while some philosophers advocate language games and use language rules in different fields to establish different forms of meaning criteria, so that languages in different fields expose the mysteries of the world in different dimensions. The former can be represented by Early Wittgenstein. His *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* emphasized that “a meaningful proposition is the truth-function of an elementary proposition”, “all logical propositions are constant truth sentences”, and “philosophy is an activity to clarify language”, etc. (Wittgenstein, 2014, pp. 5-89); the latter can be represented by Late Wittgenstein. His *Philosophical Investigations* no longer focused on the construction of an ideal language, but aimed to clarify the rules of daily language use. Therefore, the idea of a “language-games” is proposed to establish the meaning of the existence of different languages from a practical perspective.²⁸ Different from this, Buddhist perspective on language brings out that “all dharmas are beyond words (ineffability/inexpressibility of all related factors)”, which demonstrates the mistake or falsehood of the theory of correspondence or the principle of verifiability in ideal language. Although “language games” show different types of languages and behind them represent different rules of the game, such discourses are not sufficient to explain the deep implication of language and hinder the promotion of human thought, especially the extension in metaphysics.

3. Through Buddhist perspective on language, it can bring out “the aspect of practice and the ways out for the future” to make up for the deficiency of daily language:

Thirdly, since the 20th century, the “linguistic turn” in the academia has attributed “analysis of language” to the actual level of human empirical life (Rorty, 1992; Dummett, 1994). However, mankind not only hopes to survive in the world happily but also needs to have actually useful knowledge and understanding of the reality behind the entire world. Why is this important? Because while people hope to survive in the global village, they are also inevitably threatened by many impermanent factors, such as natural and man-made disasters, pandemics, and wars. For example, COVID-19, which has ravaged the world for more than one and half years,

²⁶ In addition, some linguists strongly advocate that language is a sieve of the real world—linguistic determinism, while some linguists weakly advocate that different languages think about the world in different ways—linguistic relativism. The claims above are not sufficient to cover all aspects of language. This can also be viewed from the Buddhist perspective on language; that is, language is dependent-arising and the nature of emptiness, see e.g., Mihalicek and Wilson (2011, pp. 461-467, 466, 480).

²⁷ It seems that linguistics and philosophy of language are quite different, but if they are discussed in-depth, the overlap between the two is very high, and many linguists do not think that a clear distinction can be made, see, e.g., Chomsky (2007, pp. 143-172).

²⁸ In *Philosophical Investigations*, late Wittgenstein believes that many philosophical problems in the past originated from philosophers’ misunderstanding and misuse of language, making philosophy an empty metaphysics. The current task of philosophy is to speak according to the rules of daily language and to examine the meaning of words in specific uses to treat this disease, see e.g., Wittgenstein (2009, pp. 5-8, 65, 50-57).

no one knows where they came from, why they are here, when it will end. Thus, we should not only be satisfied with the world by pursuing knowing what is happening, but we should be more seeking to know why it is going so. That is to say, we need to make metaphysics really come alive by “from knowledge to wisdom” concerning the Buddhist perspective on language.

Moreover, the Buddhist perspective on language is not just to point out “language’s deficiencies, faults, and traps”. It also can bring out the practical aspect from, e.g., “*na punar yathōcyate* (But again it is not so as one speaks of it)” —only through the real cultivation of hearing, contemplating, and practicing (or precept, calm abiding and wisdom), can the reality of the world be personally witnessed. What is more, compared with other religions or metaphysical theories, Buddhist teachings provide many instructions on the practical aspect and guides the ways out for the future, including the next lives. According to the Buddhist scriptures, all sentient beings assuredly look for being free from suffering as well as having happiness. First, they should observe the “five precepts and ten virtues” with respect to ethics and morals, if so, they will go to the higher realms to become human beings again or higher beings (gods/goddesses) in the next life. As a matter of fact, those who have the minds of harmlessness, kindness, or compassion based on the “five precepts and ten virtues” may also obtain a steady physical and peaceful mental status in this life. Based on this, when the practitioner becomes disgusted with the whole cycle of life and death, he seeks the liberation from *saṃsāra* and cultivates “precept, calm abiding, wisdom” and to achieve the *nirvāṇa*—the state of silence and the unconditioned *dharmatā* (the state/nature of dharma). This is the path of liberation. On top of these above, those who are able to understand and share the feelings of others in *saṃsāra* will create a great compassion so that these bodhisattvas cannot bear the sufferings from all living beings. For the sake of these mother-like sentient beings, they will cultivate the “10 *pāramitā*” of the *Mahāyāna* to achieve the *samyaksaṃbodhi*—the supreme bodhi status, which is the path of supreme bodhi.

4. Buddhist perspective on language—reflection on meta-language—is extremely profound and internalized:

As we have noted, “language is just a conventional facility in expression” in the Buddhist perspective on language. The discourse of the conditions for the production of language or voice is extremely brief in the Buddhist scriptures.²⁹ Nevertheless, it does not mean that language or text is not important, but rather it emphasizes its role as a pedagogical tool for the soteriological purpose, because of having the effect of guiding oneself into the *nirvāṇa* (the path of liberation) or into the *samyaksaṃbodhi* (the path of supreme bodhi). For instance, Chapter 10 in *the 2nd Assembly of the Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtras* states that the bodhisattvas dwell in 113 types of *samādhi*, a state of meditative consciousness.³⁰ Among them, there are nine kinds of *samādhi* in connection with languages, which means to become a Buddha also has to be proficient in the language.

With regard to Buddhist perspective on language—reflection on meta-language, in addition to the above, other views about language in Buddhist scriptures are like “*yathā-rutārthābhi-niviṣṭa* (getting attached to meaning as being in conformity with words)” in *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, “*anābhilāpya-dharmatā* (the inexpressible unconditioned reality)” in *Saṃdhi-nirmocana-sūtra*, “*prapañcopaśama* (free from conceptual construction or being quiescent of all fictions)” in *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, “*nirābhilāpya-svabhāvatā* (the inexpressible essential nature of all dharmas)” in *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*, etc. Even Zen Buddhism in China also brings out

²⁹ See e.g., *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Chap. 3); T. 16, No. 672, 610a.

³⁰ For the above doctrine, please refer to Kimura (1990, p. 63). Cf. T. 7, No. 220 (2), 74a-b; Conze (1975a, pp. 355-356); also see Tsai (2020, p. 44).

the language view of “no establishment of words”, which means deliberate dismissing of the written language. All these Buddhist teachings sharply point out the limitations, blind spots and drawbacks of the fixed, static, differentiated, divergent, or vague characteristics of language. Looking at the above, we can comprehensibly see that the Buddhist perspective on language is unique and superior both in respect of language itself and philosophy of language.

Conclusion

In order to solve the major problems of human beings concerning birth, aging, sickness, and death, Śākyamuni Buddha became an ascetic *śramaṇa* to seek the truth, and finally realized the ineffable reality of the world, the truth (manifested) in the utmost meaning. To expound the realm of enlightenment he had realized to people, he had to use the linguistic convention to express the inexpressible state. After hearing and contemplating, people continuously cultivate following the path of liberation or enlightenment, and eventually, they will be liberated or become Buddhas. The main purpose of this paper is to use Buddhist perspective on language, based on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* mainly, to compare the daily language in the world—especially linguistics and philosophy of language in the academia, hence point out their limitations, blind spots, drawbacks, and even pitfalls, so as to see the crux of the language problem, and turn to Buddhism establishes the path of practice as well as “bringing wisdom from knowledge”. In this way, it not only could cause a steady physical and peaceful mental status to us in this life but also open up a bright path for our future.

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