

**The Two Aspects or Sides of Reality from a Chan/Zen Perspective** *Compiled by Domyo Burk, 2026*

| <b>Shih (or Ji) 事 - Contingent</b>  | <b>Li (or Ri) 理 - Essential</b>  |
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| <b>relative:</b> dimension of reality in which each and every thing is identified and defined by relative positions and qualities   | <b>absolute:</b> dimension of reality in which each and everything is part of a seamless whole   |
| <b>dependent dimension:</b> the dimension of time, space, and causality, of which we are usually aware  | <b>independent dimension:</b> the dimensionless “dimension” of right here, right now – boundless and without need of differentiation                                 |
| <b>phenomena:</b> all that manifests and happens  | <b>principle:</b> truth or reality underlying, or manifesting through, phenomena   |
| <b>form:</b> short for the five skandhas, or form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness; everything that can be touched, sensed, conceived, or experienced   | <b>emptiness:</b> the quality of all things being empty of inherent, independent, enduring self-essence  |
| <b>individuality, uniqueness:</b> the reality that no two things, moments, or beings are the same   | <b>sameness:</b> the reality that all things share the same nature (empty, part of a seamless whole, independent)  |
| <b>light:</b> all things can be differentiated from each other  | <b>dark:</b> all differentiations fall away or become irrelevant   |
| <b>many, myriad, separateness:</b> the countless things and beings in the universe  | <b>one, unity:</b> being empty, nothing can be differentiated from anything else in an ultimate, permanent sense   |
| <b>difference:</b> the relative reality where there are effective and important differences between things (harmful vs helpful, deluded vs wise, etc.)  | <b>equality:</b> the way in which all things are marked by emptiness, sameness, and unity, while all differentiations are relative and impermanent                   |
| <b>interdependence:</b> each thing is defined by its relationships to other things, and by what it is <i>not</i> , so insofar as it can be differentiated, each thing is dependent on all other things <i>by definition</i> | <b>independence:</b> each thing has absolute value given its unique place within the seamless whole, or “merit expressed according to function and place” (Sandokai) |
| <b>attributes:</b> the qualities and circumstances that define our individuality and affect our experience; the unique flavor of our lives and personal karma   | <b>true nature:</b> the luminous, self-sufficient nature of each thing and being based on absolute qualities and completely independent of relative ones             |
| <b>conditional:</b> the relative differentiations we make in order to live our lives, which are always based on conditions and subject to change  | <b>ultimate:</b> the unchanging, absolute aspect of reality, which is not limited by conditions, space, or time; it was before we were born and will be after we die |
| <b>mundane:</b> the way we experience reality when we are only aware of the relative, and our fixed ideas label things as ordinary, or relatively unremarkable and unworthy of our attention                                | <b>suchness, thusness:</b> the luminous, precious, miraculous quality of phenomena when they are experienced with an awareness of the absolute                       |