# HERMENEUTICS IN THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST TEXTS: AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

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## Abstract

This paper investigates hermeneutical theories of Buddhism for the purpose of solving conflicts among different Buddhist sects, in particular the different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings (*Buddhadhamma*). It has three objectives: (1) to analyze the general theories of Hermeneutics from the ancient to the contemporary periods, (2) to investigate the theories of Hermeneutics in Theravada Buddhism from the pre-commentaries to the post-commentaries, and (3) to compare and contrast the general Hermeneutics with the Buddhist Hermeneutics in order to apply those founded Hermeneutics to interpret the controversy in some issues of the Buddhist teaching. It will show that the Buddhist hermeneutical theory known as 'Catupatisaraṇasutra' could be compared with that of Schleiermacher's. Hermeneutics in Buddhism can be characterized as 'Interaction-ism', which is of 'interpretation-explanation combined' theory, exemplified in the Nettipakarana text and in those of Thai Buddhist scholars, who try to solve the problem of 'Whether Nibbana be Self or Not-Self'. It is also found that hermeneutics could better support mutual understanding among various religions in general than other approaches, this is demonstrated by Buddhadadasa Bhikkhu's hermeneutics based on two kinds of language, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutics.

## Introduction

In Buddhism, there persist many controversies. For instance, whether Nibbana can be considered self or not-self, whether Prince Siddhartha could walk seven steps immediately

when he was born from his mother's womb, or whether to be an Arahant is to be an ungrateful person. These controversies require interpretation for mutual understanding among the Buddhists. We may therefore ask: "Is Hermeneutics necessary for Buddhism?" and "How can Hermeneutics give rise to mutual understanding among different religions or within the same religion?"

When asked: What is meant by Hermeneutics? Does Hermeneutics have any rule and regulation? When did Hermeneutics originate? Was there a person who invented it? One answer is: no one invented the Hermeneutics; it originated by its own nature (Terry, 1979, p. 174).  Others suggest that Hermeneutics can be considered a part of Post-Modernism.[1]  The term 'Hermeneutics' has been defined in many ways. For Heidegger, hermeneutics is understood with regard to human existence (1962, p. 183), in other words, "human beings exist through interpretive activity" (Stiver, 1996, p. 91), in order to understand oneself and the external world.  Hans-Georg Gadamer opined further, "Hermeneutics is an understanding of meaning, and accordingly equated with an interpretation", (1991, p. 259). Richard E. Palmer extended its meaning, "A study of how to understand a text or a book is hermeneutics", (1969, pp. 8-9). He further states:

"It could be said that scientists call an analysis of data as hermeneutics, a literary critic calls an examination of a literature as hermeneutics, a language translator is also known as a hermeneutician, a news critic interprets the news, so in our daily lives, we interpret our activities, sometimes the interpretation of ours is right and sometimes it is wrong. We sometimes interpret the sideboard along the roadside, when we are traveling by a public bus. We interpret a receiving letter, and so on. According to

Richard E. Palmer, even an animal survives its life through the activity of its interpretation, when it instinctively goes for food", (1969, p. 9).

David E. Klemm holds that Hermeneutics is centered on a process of understanding of meaning through signs and symbols. According to Klemm, Hermeneutics attempts to understand others, and in short Hermeneutics is a theoretical investigation of meaning through a method of understanding, (Klemm, 1986, vol.I,p. 2). Klemm has divided Hermeneutics into 4 kinds of understanding, namely (1) understanding as activity, (2) understanding as language, (3) understanding as dialogue, and (4) understanding as an application (for life). After having defined the hermeneutics as such, he then divided hermeneutics into 4 types corresponding to the four kinds of understanding: (1) Hermeneutics as an interpretation, (2) Hermeneutics as moral ethics, (3) Hermeneutics as speculative ontology, and (4) Hermeneutics as Theology. Klemm gives special emphasis to the centrality to the understanding for language, so for him, hermeneutics' meaning can be distilled into a simple phrase "I Understand You". Each of the terms possesses special meaning, for instance, the term "I" stands for the "hermeneutics as speculative ontology", "Understand" refers to "hermeneutics as ethical understanding", and the "You" refers to "hermeneutics as interpretation". The emphasis on the term "you", implies the interlocutor in hermeneutic understanding.

When asked: Is there any hermeneutics in Buddhism? There are various opinions from Buddhist scholars. Donald S. Lopez, in his edited book "*Buddhist Hermeneutics*", answered thus: "There are a number of recurrent issues that appear central to the hermeneutical enterprise in Buddhism. These include the use of the doctrine of *upāya* as a hermeneutical

principle, the role of spiritual development in understanding a text, the relationship between hermeneutics and soteriology", (1988, p.5). In this paper, the researcher sides with Lamott (1988, pp. 11-27), who says that "Buddhism has Dhamma as stated by the Buddha to be a criterion for determining of the teaching and discipline whether it is right or wrong". George Bond (1988, pp. 29-45) also says, "Buddhist hermeneutics has already existed in the scriptures known as the 'Nettipakaraṇa' and the 'Petakopadesa', which are specified as a kind of hermeneutics in the light of two texts known as the Visuddhimagga and the Vimuttimagga." Buddhaghosacariya says, "All the Buddha's teaching is comparable to hermeneutics".

Hermeneutics is taken as a new logic different from the Aristotelian logic, for the latter is based on argumentation, but the former is on understanding.

**Research Approach**

Although Western Hermeneutics is often critical of the idea of "method," it is helpful for us to be aware of the guidelines set by Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Prayuth Payutto) in his book entitled *Universities and Buddhist Researches*. There he states: "There are three steps in studying and doing research in Buddhism in modern times: (1) To apply the framework of modern science for the Buddhist thought, in order to search for the Buddhist thought corresponding to a particular field; (2) To compare and contrast between the modern thought and Buddhist thought properly; and (3) To step beyond the framework of modern thought and concentrate more on the Buddhist thought, (2534/1991, pp. 81-84).

To apply the framework of modern sciences for research in Buddhism is to integrate Buddhism into the modern sciences with the idea of allowing an acceptance of the later developments of the modern sciences for the purpose of solving the present social problems.

The above mentioned theoretical framework consists of two parts, namely (1) the reality of world view, and (2) the proof of world view through direct experience in real life, and all that is called a problem solving in the light of 'The Four Noble Truths' (*Ariyasacca*) (P.A. Payutto, 1986/2529, pp. 731-732), which can be divided into theory and research:[2]

A. Theory is divided into three stages, viz.:

1. The stage of determining a problem (*dukkha*): That is to create an understanding of where the problem is and what is its scope..

2. The stage of tracing back to the cause or origin of the problem (*samudaya*):

3. The stage of speculative extinction of the cause of the problem (*nirodha*): It is a stage of establishing hypotheses concerning the solving of problems.

B. Research involves finding the path or way of problem solving, which could be related to modern scientific method, and divided into three stages, viz.:

1. Esanā, which is the stage of seeking a possible solution or experimentation and data collection.

2. Vimaṁsā, which is the state of examining and organizing the collected data of both the Buddhist and general Hermeneutics.

3. Anubhoda, which is the stage of concluding and presenting the research findings and is a stage of accepting or denying the hypothesis.

This analytical approach is very popular and valuable. Yet we can begin to examine whether there is a basis for Hermeneutics within the Buddhist texts themselves. But first it will be helpful to characterize the various periods and characteristics of Western hermeneutics.

**Periods of Western Hermeneutics**

We can divide Western hermeneutics into three periods for ease of understanding,. This leads to the groupings: (1) pre-modern hermeneutics, (2) modern hermeneutics, and (3) postmodern hermeneutics. Each of these groupings can be distinguished by four attitudes: (1) attitude to the concept of ultimate reality, (2) attitude to the external world, (3) attitude to life, and (4) attitude to interpretation (of those before mentioned aspects), (Klemm, vol. I, 1986, Introduction).

*Pre-Modern Hermeneutics*: Pre-modern hermeneutics occurs prior to the Western Enlightenment. Its attitudes can be characterized as follows: (1) *attitude towards the concept of ultimate reality*: there is no distinction between the ultimate reality and its symbol, for example, in Hinduism there is a belief in *Trimurti* and that of Trinity in Christianity, (2) *attitude towards the external world*: People perceived the world as holy, for it was created by God, (3) *attitude towards life*: People were religious, attached to religious ceremonies, and lived their life in a simple way, and *(4)* *attitude towards interpretation*: People followed literal interpretation, for instance, Christians really believed that the World was created by God in six days, the Buddhists believed that Siddhartha could walk seven steps immediately when he was born from his mother's womb. The prospective theory of hermeneutics is three types of the Biblical hermeneutics, such as the Negative Way Interpretation, etc., (Stiver,

1996, pp. 19-20). This included the group of Hermeneutics known as 'transcendentalist' such as the Allegorical Interpretation theory. (Terry, 1979, p. 168).

*Modern Hermeneutics*: This begins in the Enlightenment and can be characterized as such: (1) *attitude towards the ultimate reality*: There is an emphasis on using reason to ascertain human self-existence, such as Descartes' trying to prove the existence of the self, (2) *attitude towards the external world*: People believed in the endless evolution of the world instead of the creation by God, (3) *attitude towards life*: People believe in modern development and new technologies and turned away from religion, (4) *attitude towards interpretation*: Hermeneutics is strictly attached to the scientific reason, the characteristics of which is doubtful about the ultimate reality and the important hermeneutical theory is centered on the Interpretation of Naturalist group, such as the Mythical Interpretation, etc. The philosophical hermeneutics originated in this time, such as "Hume's Fork," positivism, and so on. In other words, the hermeneutical trend of this time is known as the "Hermeneutics of Suspicion." Wittgenstein's Ideal Language or Language as the picture of the World can also be included here.

*Post Modern Hermeneutics*: this is the hermeneutics of the present period, the essence of which is summarized thus: (1) *attitude towards the ultimate reality*: People no longer trust mere scientific development but also turn back to religion. There is the belief that both science and religion will have to be integrated, that science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind. Following Buddhism this can be called the *middle way* of science and religion. More emphasis is placed on language as a medium to establish the relationship between man and modern sciences covering culture, social, politics and economics. (2) *Attitude towards the external world*: The world is perceived as neither holy

nor unholy, but people think of language as a tool for understanding the world together with the belief that everything coexists relatively. (3) *Attitude towards life*: The belief that the collaboration among diverse peoples will lead to survival of the world. And (4) *attitude towards interpretation*: People accept the importance of hermeneutics as necessary for working together for understanding each other through texts. Apologetic Interpretation is considered as essential. The hermeneutical theories of this period include those of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, and can be categorized as a "hermeneutics of suspicion." It also shows some similarities to Wittgenstein's theory of "language games."

**Buddhist Hermeneutics**

We can also distinguish Buddhist hermeneutics into different periods. This is based upon the periods of the Buddhist scriptures. They are: (1) Pre-commentary Hermeneutics, which includes the Tipiṭaka and Nettipakaraṇa, (2) Commentary Hermeneutics, and (3) Post-Commentary Hermeneutics, which include hermeneutics as practiced by Thai Buddhist scholars through both hermeneutics of Dhamma studies (pariyatti) and Insight Meditation (vipassanā).

The Pre-commentary hermeneutics: The Tipiṭaka consists of the essential doctrines that could be taken as the hermeneutical theories, such as the doctrine of Dependent Origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), and twenty-four relations (paccayas), etc., four great authorities (mahapadesa), non-disagreeable method (apaṇṇaka), ten principles of faith, metaphor, parable, simile, dialogue, etc. Although these doctrines are normally taken as Dhamma, that must be put into practice through direct experience, they can also be taken as

the hermeneutical theories that could be used to interpret other teachings as well, (Khemananda, 1993, pp. 76-114). Hermeneutics in Theravada Buddhism is known as the "Gradual Path" (anupubbamagga), following the Buddha's teaching step by step from morality, concentration and insight. This gradual path corresponds to the five graduated sermons (anupubbīkathā), starting from 'talk on giving' (dānakathā), (D.I.148). The hermeneutical principles of "Gradual Path" are mentioned in the Nettipakaraṇa and Petakopadesa texts, including the Visuddhimagga, as Bond points out, "Both the Netti and the Petakopadesa develop the notion of the 'Gradual Path' to Nibbana and employ it as a hermeneutical strategy for explaining the Dhamma" (Bond, 1988, p. 29). But in Mahayana, the well-known "Skillful Means" method (one of the ten perfections of Bodhisatva's doctrines) is generally accepted. The "Skillful" signifies cleverness in training living beings for the attainment of Nibbana. (the Saddharmapundarikasutra, Cha-em Keawklaiy, tr., p. 30)

The Nettipakaraṇa, recognized as an authentic text and compiled after the time of the Tipitaka but before the commentaries, proposes its own system for dividing hermeneutics, namely *five methods* (*naya*), *sixteen kinds of conveying* (*hāra*) and the *sixteen patterns of dispensation* (*sāsanapaṭṭhāna*).

Here, the conveying of teaching (*desanāhāra*), one of the sixteen types of conveying, will be explained. The conveying of teaching consists of six gradual interpretations, namely (1) gratification (*assāda*), (2) disadvantage (*ādīnava*), (3) renunciation (*nissarana*), (4) consequence (*phala*), (5) skillful means (*upāya*), and (6) persuasion or instruction (*ānatti*). All kinds of events and happenings could be analyzed through this process of gradual instruction. And this type of instruction must be able to be examined by the Four Noble Truths and

categorized in the 'Graduated Sermon" (*anupuppīkathā*). For example, a concept of worship (*pūjā*) can be interpreted as follows:

1. Gratification (*Assāda*): Pleasant happiness (*sukhasomanas*), which is a pleasant feeling due to the worship as such, and due to desire in enjoying this-worldly things (*logiyadhamma*), that is called 'gratification' (*assāda*). Gratification as such is taken as 'the truth of the cause of suffering' (samudyāriyasacca) and also taken as the first three 'gradual sermons' (*anupuppīkathā*), namely 'talk of charity' (*dānakathā*), 'talk of precept' (*sīlakathā*), and 'talk of heavenly world' (*sakkakathā*).

2. Disadvantage (*Ādhīnava*): Dhamma leading to be born in three worlds (*tebhūmikdhamma*): The three worlds are known as 'the plane of the sense-enjoying-creature' (*kāmabhūmī*), 'the plane of the form creature' (*rūpabhūmī*), and 'the plane of the formless creature' (*arūpabhūmī*). And to be born in these three worlds after death is taken as 'suffering in the wheel of life' (*saṁsāradhukkha*), which is known as a 'disadvantage' (*ādhīnava*) in the Nettipakaraṇa, so it is to be regarded as 'the Noble Truth of Suffering and as 'a talk of the disadvantage of sensual pleasure' (*kāmādīnavakathā*) in the Gradual Sermon.

3. Dissolution (*Nissaraṇa*): Nibbana is known as 'dissolution' (*nissaraṇa*) and this is taken as 'the path leading to extinction of suffering' (*nirodhāriyasacca*) and is grouped in the Gradual Sermons as 'the talk of advantage of renunciation' (*nekkhammānisaṁsakathā*).

4. Advantage (*Bhala*): Results of such worshiping leads the worshiper beyond blame, by his or her own self or by others, and escape from being born in the hellish world. It is called '*bhala*', which is also taken as 'the Truth of the Path Leading to the Extinction of Suffering' (*Maggāriyasacca*).

5. Skillful Means (*Upāya*): The worshiping which is a cause of attaining the result is called '*upaya*', and it is also categorized as 'the Truth of the Path Leading to the Extinction of Suffering' (*Maggāriyasacca*).

6. Instruction (*Ānatti*): The instruction for worshiping the persons that should be worshiped: Those persons are known as the Buddha and so on. This is called 'instruction' (*Ānatti*), and is taken as 'the Truth of the Path Leading to the Destruction of Suffering' (*Maggāriyasacca*).   (Phravisuddhacariya, 1990, p. 4).

Hermeneutics in the Commentary Period appeared prominently in the Vissuddhimagga, which analyzed a style of questioning into 4 types, for instance,  the concept of fire could be questioned as to "what are the fire's characteristics, duty, result, and origin or basis?", and the answer of which is thus: "the heat, burning, light and one of three elements, are the characteristics, duty, result, and basis of the fire respectively",  (Khemananada, 1993, pp. 115-116). This style of question-answer can be applied to the remaining teachings of 'Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, Five Aggregates, Twelve Bases, and Eighteen Elements, as contained in the Visuddhimagga.

Post-commentary Hermeneutics: In this section, the forms of interpretation as performed by Thai Buddhist scholars are investigated in some details. For example, mention is made of the Buddhadasa's theory of two kinds of language, namely "Human Language and Dhamma Language; Phradhammakittiwong's hermeneutics of the Buddha's Sayings (Buddhabhāsita); Prof. Wit Witsadawet's hermeneutics of unity in plurality; Prof. Kirti

Bunchua's hermeneutics of the five paradigms, etc. An investigation has been made to cover the hermeneutics of two kinds of meditation practice, namely tranquility and insight meditation as practiced in Thai Buddhist Sangha.

**Comparisons and Observations**

It is said that "without comparison is without comprehension". With this idea in mind, the researcher has tried his best to make the following comparisons. The four hermeneutical principles of refuge as mentioned in the Catupaṭisaraṇasutra could be compared with Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics based on two constituents of psychological and grammatical factors. Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Speculative Ontology could be compared and contrasted with the Buddhist hermeneutics of not-self based on Insight Meditation (*vipassanā*). Klemm's hermeneutics of "I Understand You" based on four types of hermeneutical understanding could be compared with the Buddhist doctrine of three ultimate realities (*saddhamma*), gained by 'study' (*pariyattisaddhamma*), 'practice' (*paṭipattisaddhamma*), and 'realization' (*paṭivedhasaddhamma*). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's theory of two kinds of language of 'human' and 'Dhamma', can be comparable to Wittgenstein's theory of two kinds of language as 'picture of the world' and 'game'. Ricoeur's Narratology can be compared with the Buddhist theory of the Pattern of Dispensation in the Nettipakaraṇa. The Milinda Hermeneutics of two cornered questions can be compared with Gadamer's theory of 'Explanation-Understanding-Application' theory as mentioned in his book *Truth and Method*. The Buddhist theory of Apaṇṇakadhamma is comparable with John Hicks' theory of post-mortem verification. Prof. Fr. George McLean's theory of "Philosophical Dialogue" could be compared with the Buddhist theory of Dhammic Dialogue (*Dhammasākacchā*), since both theories have been directed towards sustainable

peace. My comparison of the two hermeneutical traditions does not intend to underestimate one tradition or the other, but to show that they can supplant one another.

Another attempt has been made to propose a combined activity of comparison of hermeneutical theories between Buddhism and general Hermeneutics and of an application of the two mentioned groups of hermeneutical theories to interpret the controversial issues in Buddhism. The nine types of Biblical Hermeneutics, especially the three Moderate Groups, could be compared with the Buddhist doctrine of Middle Dhamma-Practice (*Majjhenadhammapaṭipadā*), which is a combination of both "Dependent Origination" (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and "Eightfold Noble Path" (*aṭhaṅgikamagga*). The application of Hermeneutics has been for the purpose of understanding the perennial debate on the question: "Is Nibbana accepted as self (*attā*) or not-self (*anattā*)". Another question is: what is the real meaning of the term "Dhamma"? The investigation has been citing examples of the Thai scholars' interpretation of some problems in the different discourses of the Tipiṭaka, for example, the case of Phra Mano Mettanando's interpretation of the cause of the Buddha's passing away in the Mahaparinibbānasutta. Further interpretations have also been made to understand the controversial issue of making merit through the offering of one's wife and children to others as in the case of the Vessantara King.

The research results have included the achievement of some renowned Thai scholars in applying the Buddhist hermeneutical principles to interpret the Buddha's teachings. For instance, Budhadadasa Bhikkhu's application of 'metaphor' (*upama*) and 'conveying of teaching' (*desanāhāra*) in the Nettipakaraṇa; or his use of 'Dhamma Dialogue' (*Dhammasākacchā*) with Kuek Rit Prāmot, who argued against his idea of 'freed-mind' (cit-wāng). Also valuable is King Bhumibhol's (Rama IX) interpretation of the Jātaka story

known as Mahājanaka. We can also cite the special case of Phrapisāladhammavādī's using the 'conveying of teaching' method to interpret the daily-life-stories '*catugāma-rāmadeva*'.

The researcher has made an investigation of the relationship between Hermeneutics and intra- inter-faith dialogue. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu is a good example of Thai Buddhist monk, who succeeded in applying his hermeneutics to interpret God as Dhamma, and has made possible mutual understanding between Buddhists and Christians. Other examples of thinkers who have contributed to this goal are Assumption University's professors, Kirti Bunchua and Warayuth Sriwarakuel, who have developed their own theories of Hermeneutics.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

I agree with the group of translators who translated the Nettipakaraṇa into Thai that the Nettipakaraṇa text is perfect in both aspects of teaching and grammar, so it should be accepted by the Thai Sangha Council as a text for classes in Pāli study, (Translators of Commentary Texts, 2003 (๒๕๔๖), pp. 24-26). However, an appreciation should really be given to Mahachula Buddhist University for incorporating the Nettipakarana as a separate course in their Master Degree Program.

Further research could be conducted on the following issues, such as "An application of Buddhist Hermeneutics to understand Dhamma in various scriptures of Theravada Buddhism". In this way, Buddhist hermeneutics could be taken as an alternative research methodology in other faculties of modern sciences such as the Faculty of Education to help solve the present educational problems in the present society. Further contributions can be achieved by comparing a particular hermeneutical theory between Buddhist hermeneutics and

the general hermeneutics.  A hermeneutical study of Vipassanā meditation of different schools of Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana would also be valuable.

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[1]According to the history of philosophy, it may be said that Hermeneutics is an outgrowth of Continental Philosophy, which emphasizes value and interpretation and is different from Analytical Philosophy, which emphasizes perceptual precision and clarity (Warayuth Sriwarakuel, 2544, p. 1). Post-modern Philosophy is a criticism of modernity and it is characterized by the belief that "Reason is hardly worth appreciation from now on, moreover, we cannot depend on reason to determine what we are doing in daily life, (Mark Tamtai, 2540, p. 51).

[2]This type of Four Noble Truths research methodology would correspond to research in the social sciences. It would consider Buddhism as the foundation of science, which allows statistical evaluation and questionnaires. An interview is an additional factor of research in religious studies especially Buddhism. The social science research approach is divided into 5 stages, viz.: (1) observation, (2) empirical generalization, (3) theory, (4) hypothesis, and (5) a decision making to accept or deny the hypothesis, (Dr. Pongsawad Sawadipong, 2550, pp. 51-65).