Theravāda Methods of Interpretation on Buddhist Scriptures

Veerachart Nimanong

Therefore Hermeneutic theory is indispensible for Buddhism because many texts contain controversial stories. The main idea of Theravāda Hermeneutics is to understand all conditioned things as impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and non-self. Particularly, non-attachment is regarded as the 'gradual path' and 'skillful means' to cultivate the conventional self and to realize the non-self. Traditionally, Buddhist hermeneutics accepts 2 levels of truth, the conventional and ultimate truths. By these concepts, Buddhist hermeneutics can accommodate both Schleiermacher's theory of the author's intention and Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizon, because the former and the latter correspond to 'gradual path' of Theravāda and 'skillful means' of Mahāyāna, respectivly. From the similar aspect, it can be said that Buddhism accepts both social self and social non-self. The former and the latter can be interpreted as 'everyday ritual' and 'beyond everyday ritual.' Self-identity in the light of right understanding through the self awareness or heedfulness must be cultivated to solve the problem of conflict occurring all over the world.

Veerachart Nimanong is a Professor of Philosophy Department at Assumption University, Thailand..

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Introduction

An attempt is made in this paper to investigate the *Theravāda* methods of Interpretation on the Buddhist scriptures. My thesis is that there is Hermeneutics in Buddhism. This Hermeneutics is called "Gradual Path" as is well known in *Theravāda* Buddhism. The main idea of *Theravāda* Hermeneutics is to understand all conditioned things as impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and non-self. The terms 'non-attachment', 'non-self' and 'the middle way as the way beyond' will be intentionally discussed in here to characterize the Buddhist context. In other words, non-attachment is regarded as the 'gradual path' (*anupuppamagga*) and 'skillful means' (*upayakosala*) to cultivate the conventional self and to realize the non-self. The non-self theory is a dialogue of doctrine and religious experience, which will eventually lead to cooperation, freedom, maximal cooperation, understanding and harmony, respectively.

I. Buddhist Hermeneutics in *Tipiṭaka* and Commentaries

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek term "Hermes", meaning a Greek messenger God who brings messages from superior Gods to other Gods and men. In other words, a study of the theories of interpretation is known as hermeneutics, which is the effort to squeeze out the meaning of the religious scriptures. It is a type of knowledge about the theories of meaning of meaning, which emphasizes very much on a characteristics of understanding the texts. In ancient Greek, hermeneutics is known as Philology, which is nowadays called "linguistics." During the medieval period, the study of the Bible is made possible by using the method of exegesis. Modern hermeneutics arises

as a general theory of understanding and interpretation of all texts, whose authority was given to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who is known as the "father of modern hermeneutics." Contemporary Hermeneutics involves both explanation and interpretation to justify the understanding of both general and religious texts. In the West, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), and Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) are proponent and in the East, especially in Thai Buddhist thought, *Bhikkhu* Buddhadasa (1906-1993) could be included in this category of Post-modernism (Lopez, 1998:1; Stiver, 1996:87-111).

Is there any hermeneutics in Buddhism? Does Buddhism need hermeneutics? According to Lopez, there is hermeneutics in Buddhism and Buddhist hermeneutics started with the Buddha's instruction to Venerable Ānanda that "The Doctrine and the Discipline, Ānanda, which I have taught and enjoined upon you is to be your teacher when I am gone." What, exactly, was his teaching and what does it mean for the teaching to be the teacher? It was the contemplation of these questions that led to what can be called Buddhist hermeneutics. Lopez opined further that Buddhism needs hermeneutics, for "Buddhism has a vast sacred canon, a fact due both to the length of the Buddha's teaching career and to the posthumous attribution of many discourses to him, especially by the *Mahāyāna*" (Lopez, 1998:1). For Lopez, "a belief common to the major schools of Buddhist thought in Asia is that the Buddha did not teach the same thing to all, but rather expediently adapted his message to meet the specific needs of his audience" (Lopez, 1998:5). The reasons that hermeneutics is essential and necessary for Buddhism were given further by Lopez as follows:

> The tradition maintained that as a Buddha, ⋯ his teachings must be free from error and contradiction. But how is one to harmonize the statement 'the self is one's protector' with the statement that 'there is no self'? How can the advice that suffering is to be identified, its origin abandoned, its cessation actualized, and the path to that cessation cultivated be seen as compatible with the declaration that 'there is no suffering, no origin, no

cessation, no path'? How is one to interpret the statement 'From the night that he attained Enlightenment to the night that he passed into *Nirvāṇa*, the *Tathāgata* did not utter a single word?' (Lopez, 1998:3).

With the above-mentioned problematic statements, Lopez has drawn his conclusion that it gave rise to the development of interpretative formulae in India, the formal beginning of Buddhist hermeneutics. It also gives rise to the different schools of Buddhism at present. Lopez is quite sure that the Buddha was seen in some instances to provide autocommentaries in which he explained what he meant by some previous teaching, while in other instances he provided rules for the interpretation of his own statements. One guideline was that found in the *Catuhpratisaranasutra*, in which the Buddha provided four reliances: "Rely on the teaching, not the teacher; rely on the meaning, not the letter; rely on the precise meaning (*nitartha*), not the indeterminate one (*neyartha*) rely on wisdom (*jñāna*), not on (*ordinary*) consciousness (*vijñāna*)" (Lopez, 1998:3). Let's discuss the Buddhist hermeneutics in more systematic details.

1. Interpretative Methods and Their Practices in *Tipiṭaka*

A. The Principle of Faith as Gradual Path

This discourse is known as *Kalamasutta*, which illustrates how faith is connected in Buddhism to verification through actual experience. The Kalama people approached the Buddha and asked him that there are different religious teachers, who come to our city. They speak very highly of their own theories but oppose, condemn and ridicule the theories of one another. We are now in state of doubt as to whom out of these recluses spoke falsehood. Then the Buddha said:

> Kalamas, you have a right to feel uncertain for you have raised a doubt in a situation in which you ought to suspend your judgement. Come now, Kalamas, do not accept anything

only on the grounds of ① tradition or ② report or ③ hearsay or ④ because it is an authority of text or ⑤ because it Is logic or ⑥ because it is inference or ⑦ because of a superficial assessment of the appearance or ⑧ because it conforms with one's approved theory or ⑨ because it is seeming possibility or ⑩ because of the prestige of your teacher. ⑪ When you, Kalamas, realize for yourself that these doctrines are evil and unjustified, that they are condemned by the wise and that when they are accepted and lived by, they conduce to ill and sorrow, then you should reject them (*A.* I.189).

The above-mentioned ten faiths can be paired with "three kinds of wisdom (*pañña*)", that is, wisdom resulting from study, wisdom from reflection, and wisdom from mental development (*D.* III.219). The faith-principles Nos. ①, ②, ③, ④ and ⑩ can be grouped under the wisdom resulting from study, the faith-principles Nos. ⑤, ⑥, ⑦, ⑧, and ⑨ can be classified into the wisdom resulting from reflection, and the last one No. ⑪ can be categorized into the wisdom derived from the mental development. The three types of wisdom as quoted above are taken as "gradual path" leading to the realization of *Nibbāna*.

B. The Method of Progressive or Graduated Sermon (*Anupubbikatha*)

The Buddha preaches this sermon first and then followed with the Fourfold Noble Truth, so this teaching deserves to be called the real gradual path in its etymological meaning of the term. This doctrine started with: ① Talk on charity (*dana*), ② talk on morality (*sīla*), ③ talk on heavenly pleasures (*sagga-katha*), ④ talk on the disadvantages of sensual pleasures (*kamadinavakatha*), and ⑤ talk on the benefits of renouncing sensual pleasures (*nekkhammanisamsakatha*) (*D.* I.148). This sermon represents a distinctively *Theravādin* method on interpreting the *Tipiṭaka*.

C. The Law of Cause and Conditions as Gradual Path

The law of cause and conditions is known in other words as the law of Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppāda*), which consists of general principle as follows: "When there is this, this is; when this is not, neither is this. Because this arises, so does this; because this ceases, so does this" (*S*. II.64-65). This law consists of 12 links started from "ignorance" to "decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, grief, and despair." This law of cause and conditions with the help of the 24 relation doctrine appeared in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* can explain the origin of human being more philosophically.

D. The Method of The Four Great Authorities

It is said that the authority is one only, but by analysis it presents as four authorities. This theory is divided into 2 types as follows:

(1) The four great authorities for determining *Dhamma*

These four great indicators are not actually a classification of authorities or means but a list of matters rejected as invalid authorities. The real purpose of the four indicators was to establish the teaching as the true authority.

> ① A monk might say: "Face to face with the Buddha did I hear this; face to face with him did I receive this. This is the Doctrine, this is the Discipline, this is the Master's teaching." It is called "The appeal to the Enlightened One as authority."
> ② A monk might say: "I such and such a monastery resides an Order (*sangha*) together with an elder monk, together with a leader. Face to face with that Order did I hear this; ⋯ ." It is called "The appeal to a community of monks or an Order as authority."
> ③ A monk might say: "In such and such a monastery reside a great number of elder monks, widely learned, versed in the Collections, experts on the Doctrine, experts on the Discipline, experts on the Summaries. In the presence of those monks did I hear this; ⋯ ." It is called "The appeal to a number of elders

as authority."

④ A monk might say: "In such and such a monastery resides an elder monk of wide learning ⋯ ." It is called "The appeal to a single elder as authority."

The words of that monk are neither to be welcomed nor scorned, the words and syllables thereof are to be studied thoroughly, laid beside the Discourses and compared with the Discipline.

If, when laid beside the Discourses and compared with the Discipline, these words, and syllables lie not along with the Discourses and agree not with the Discipline then you may come to the conclusion: Surely this is not the word of the Buddha, and it has been wrongly grasped by that monk. Then reject it (*D*. II.123; *A*. II.167).

(2) The four great authorities for determining Discipline

The four indicators allow what is in accordance with the Discipline to be adopted and what is not in accordance to be rejected even when those matters are not being directly referred to in the Discipline (*Vin*. I.250).

① What has not been considered inappropriate is inappropriate if it resembles what is inappropriate. For example: Riding a bicycle is not prohibited for monks by their discipline; but it resembles what is not appropriate (*asamvara*) for monks; hence it is taken as inappropriate.

② What has not been considered inappropriate is appropriate if it resembles what is appropriate. For example: A cup of tea in the afternoon has not been prohibited as inappropriate, but resembles what is appropriate; hence it is appropriate.

③ What has not been considered appropriate is inappropriate if it resembles what is inappropriate. For example: Wearing a wrist-watch has not been approved, but it resembles what is inappropriate because it is a kind of ornament; hence it is not appropriate.

④ What has not been considered appropriate is appropriate if it resembles what is appropriate. For example: To carry a watch in the inner coat is not approved, but it resembles what is appropriate for one needs to know time; hence it is

appropriate.

E. The Method of *Apannaka* Practice

The Apannaka is a name of Buddhist *sutta* (*M. Sutta* No.94). It is an epistemic psychological attitude form of interpretation of all kinds of doubts on the Buddha's teachings. The *apannaka* which does not involve logical reasoning cannot be inference; but inference is an aspect of *apannaka*.

Although the Buddha taught this method to Saleyyakas who did not believe in any religion the method may well be used, in their many different practical questions, by both those who believe and those who do not.

The *apannaka* may be employed in determining any uncertain matter. For example let's see how this method may be used in determining whether or not there is a fact behind the belief that the Buddha visited Thailand. The following steps may be considered:

① (According to the folk-lore) it is possible that the Buddha visited Thailand.
② (In the opinion of those who deny folk-lore) it is also possible that the Buddha did not.
③ We pay homage to *Sripada* (the Buddha's footprints) with the belief that the Buddha visited Thailand.
④ If the Buddha had visited Thailand in actuality we would gain 'merit'.
⑤ If the opposite was true and the Buddha did not visit Thailand still the religious practice motivated by the belief would result in both generating 'merit' and spreading a good name for us.
⑥ In this manner, we gain irrespective of the factuality of the belief that the Buddha visited Thailand.

In this manner, an intelligent person would conclude that it is right to pay homage to the Buddha whether he visited Thailand or not.

It seems that the optimistic attitude of Europeans is comparable to the Apannaka practice of Buddhism in many, though not in all,

respects.

F. The Method of Four Assurances.

In connection with the *Kalamasutta* as mentioned earlier, the Buddha has offered the alternative way or option for those who do not yet profess to believe in any faith.

> "If there is a world beyond, and there is the fruit and result of *kamma* well-done or ill, then when the body breaks up after death, I shall arise in a happy born, in a heaven world."
> "If, however, there is no world beyond, no fruit and result of *kamma* well-done or ill, yet in this very life I dwell free from hostility and affliction, sorrowless and happy."
> "Again, even if having done evil *kamma* and it is effective in producing a result, nevertheless (now) I do not think to do evil towards anyone, so how can ill touch me?"
> "Again, if not having done evil and it is not effective (producing no result) then in both ways I hold myself utterly pure" (*A*. I.189).

It can be put in our observation that this theory of four assurances converges with Pascal's theory of "wager" to believe in God and William James' theory of "Will to Believe", and both theories are entitled as "Voluntarism Theories of Faith" (Hick, 1963:59).

G. The Method of Simile

To explain a particular point or idea, we found that the Buddha has applied similes. Simile is analysis by making use of comparison (*upama*) and the compared (*upameyya*). For example: "He whose corruptions are destroyed, he who is not attached to food, he who has perceived void and unconditioned freedom, his track cannot be traced, like that of birds in the air" (*Dh*. 93). Another example is this: "Though through all his life a fool associate with a wise man, he yet understands not the *Dhamma*, as the spoon does not understand the

flavor of soup" (*Dh*. 64). It can be explained further that the cause or comparison is the similes of "birds in the air have no trace" and "the spoon knows not the flavor of soup", but the effect is the compared.

H. The Method of Parable

The parable is a long simile or a simile with a long explanation with a story. It is like a story of the Buddha and the sick man. The Buddha uttered the stanza: "He that would wait upon Me, let him wait upon the sick" (*Vin*. I.301-302). The parable goes thus: Once upon a time, a certain monk was sick with a disorder of the bowels, and lay sprawling in his own urine and dung. Now the Buddha, with Venerable Ānanda as attendant monk, wandering from place to place in search of lodging, approached the dwelling-place of that monk. The Buddha saw that monk lying sprawling in his own urine and dung. Seeing, he approached that monk, and said this to that monk: "Monk, what ails you?" "It is disorder of the bowels, Reverend Sir." "But have you a monk to wait upon you?" "I have not, Reverend Sir." "Why do not the monks wait upon you?" "I, Reverend Sir, am of no use to the monks; therefore the monks do not wait upon me." Then the Buddha addressed Ānanda: "Go, Ānanda, fetch water; we will bath this monk." When Ānanda brought the water for Him, the Buddha poured the water; Ānanda bathed the monk. The Buddha grasped him by the head; Ānanda lifted him by the feet; they laid him on a bed. Then the Buddha, employing this incident as the source, as the subject, of a lesson, convoked the Assembly of Monks and addressed the monks thus: "Monks, you have no mother, you have no father, to wait upon you. If you, monks, will not wait upon each other, then who will wait upon you? Monks, he that would wait upon Me, let him wait upon the sick."

2. Interpretative   Methods   and   Their   Practices   in   the Commentaries (*Atthakathas*)

In Buddhism there are two levels of *dhamma*, called the *dependent origination* (*saṃsāra*) and *dependent cessation* (*nibbāna*) (*S*. II.1). The tradition that there are two levels of the Buddha's discourses has been systematically expressed in the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* (the deep and profound teachings) as the Buddhist theory of two truths, namely 'conventional truth' (*sammatisacca*) and 'ultimate truth' (*paramatthasacca*). The conventional truth denotes the everyday level of knowledge, while the ultimate truth denotes a form of knowledge based directly on underlying truth or reality (*AA*. I.95).[1]

A. Interpretative Method in the Guide (*Nettippakarana*)

According to George D. Bond, the *Nettippakarana* is the *Theravāda's* first solution to the problem of interpretation (Bond, 1982:34). It seems that once the Buddhist scriptures were written down, the interpretative principle laid down in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* was considerably revised. One of the most important methodological texts of the literary period of traditional *Theravāda* Buddhism is the *Netti-Pakarana*[2] as leading to the 'right construing' of the Buddha's words: "These terms and phrasing (in question) must be placed beside the *sutta*, compared with the *vinaya* and patterned after the essential nature of *dhamma*."[3] The principle that interpretations of the doctrine should 'be patterned after the essential nature of the *dhamma*' is more general than that put forward by the Buddha, proposing that a view or opinion should be theoretically consistent with the doctrinal basics of the religion, rather than being a literal restatement of the Buddha's words, as required by

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1 Some more terms are further elaborated in the *Abhidhamma*, such as, the conditioned and the unconditioned, the *lokiya dhamma* or *cariya dhamma* for the layperson, which promotes well-being but does not end the process of rebirth, and the *lokuttara dhamma* or *sacca dhamma* for the renunciation, which leads directly to the cessation of rebirth and to liberation from suffering (*Dhs*. 193, 245).

2 The *Netti-Pakarana* is attributed to *Mahakaccayana*, an immediate disciple of the Buddha. It is not regarded as canonical by the Sinhalese and is not part of the Thai *Tipiṭaka* but is included in the Burmese canon.

3 George D. Bond, "The Netti-Pakarana: A Theravada Method of Interpretation," In Somaratna Balasooriya (Ed.), *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*, Gordon Fraser, London, 1980, p. 20, quoted in Jackson, Peter A, 1988, p.103.

the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*.

The *Nettipakarana* develops the canonical interpretative principle into a form more appropriate to a literary tradition in which the demands of simple memorization have been lifted and detailed textual analysis can be undertaken. The principle that, scriptural interpretations should be patterned after the *dhamma*, amounts to a recognition that in a literary tradition faithfulness to the Buddha's teaching no longer necessitates a strictly literal adherence to his actual words, but may also be based upon views, which follow the spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

The *Netti-Pakarana* teaches that the scriptures can be interpreted at two levels: at the level of understanding the literal meaning of statements and terms, and at the level of understanding how those terms and statements point towards or are suggestive of *Nibbāna*. Bond opined that the *Nettipakarana* developed the notion of the gradual path to *Nibbāna* and employed it as a hermeneutical strategy for explaining the *Dhamma*. According to Bond, the *Nettipakarana* represents the social facts of ancient India, which generated two kinds of religious traditions. One was called the "disciplines of salvation," which were applicable to the renouncer, and the other one was "religions", which were characterized by the provisions they made to meet the needs of the people living in the society (Lopez, 1988:33-35). To delineate the structure of the gradual path, the *Nettipakarana* set forth classifications of types of persons to whom the Buddha addressed his teachings and types of discourses that the Buddha employed to reach these persons.

In the *Saddasaratthajalini*, two types of textual interpretation are mentioned. What is said by the Buddha has to be understood either as meaning still to be determined (indirect meaning) such as the term 'self' (*atta*) or as meaning already determined (direct meaning) such as the term 'impermanence' (*anicca*) (Khemananda, 1993:97).

B. Interpretative Method in the Questions of King Milinda (*Milindapanha*)

In the *Milindapanha*, the methods of "two-cornered question" and

"simile" were found used as the regular format to present the Buddha's teachings. Here the two-cornered question deserves for the mention. During the time of the Buddha, many *Brahmins* and ascetics formulated two-cornered questions and came to debate with the Buddha with the intention of winning. The *Tipiṭaka* reported that the Buddha could refute all such arguments. In the *Milindapanha*, it is recorded that Venerable Nagasena successfully faced two-cornered questions presented by King Milinda. In the *Milindapanha*, such questions are known as "sheep-questions (*mendakapanha*)", for like a sheep who could take its enemy by either horn, those who argue with these questions contrive to catch their opponents by either of the arguments.

For example: King Milinda asked: Step ① If the Buddha were omniscient he could have known the nature of *Devadatta*. The Buddha ordained him, and he subsequently caused great harm both to himself and to the dispensation. This shows that the Buddha did not know it beforehand. Therefore the Buddha is not omniscient; and step ② if the Buddha ordained him knowing what would happen in the future the Buddha is not endowed with incomparable kindness. Therefore the Buddha is unkind and hence he is not omniscient. Thus whether the Buddha ordained *Devadatta* knowingly or unknowingly he is not omniscient.

Venerable Nagasena answered: If the Buddha were to not ordained *Devadattan* he would have caused a greater harm to the world. The fact that he was ordained reduced this damage. Therefore the Buddha is omniscient since he did it knowingly. Furthermore he could practice virtues at least for a short period of time since he was ordained by the Buddha, and this practice enabled him to see his fault in the end. As a result he will be freed from his woeful state one day. Otherwise this could never have happened. The Buddha is omniscient precisely because he ordained *Devadatta* in order to reduce the gravity of is criminal behaviour. For the very same reason the Buddha is omniscient.

C. Interpretative Method in the Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*)

The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhagosacariya Thera has its own characteristics of scriptural interpretation, which in a sense corresponds to the *Vimuttimagga* of Upatissa Thera. Here an emphasis in the *Visuddhimagga* is made to interpret the understanding of doctrinal terms. How can we understand the *Dhammic* terms? The understanding is possible in four ways: ① Characteristics, which refers to the nature of a phenomenon; ② function or 'what it does' ③ manifestation or manner of comprehending a phenomenon; ④ proximate reason or indispensable condition. For example, in understanding what the fire is we may make use of this fourfold division in the following manner: ① the character of the fire is heat; ② its function is to burn; ③ its result (manifestation) is (causing) mildness and ④ its proximate condition is the other great elements.

For a comprehensive understanding, it is necessary to analyse any phenomenon according to this fourfold analysis. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa analyses such phenomena as the four great elements, the four noble truths, doctrine of dependent co-origination, threefold discipline, aggregates, elements and spheres following this mode of analysis.

D. Interpretative Example of "*Nibbāna*" according to the Commentaries (*Atthakathas*)

The *Nettippakarana* gives a large number of the so-called synonyms of *Nibbāna*. The new terms mentioned are transcendental (*uttara*) unlike (*asama*), matchless (*appatisama*), foremost (*settha*), best (*jettha*).

According to the *Milindapanha*, *Nibbāna* is described as a happy state; it is the cessation bringing about the end of the wheel of life and death and thus all aggregation of pain comes to an end. *Nibbāna* is unique, similar to nothing; and we have no way to conceive its form figure, duration or any kind of measurement. And yet *Nibbāna* to some extent can be shown through its qualities. For example, *Nibbāna* can be

likened to a lotus. Just as a lotus is not tarnished by water so is *Nibbāna* untarnished by any evil disposition. Again, the qualities, of *Nibbāna* can be compared to those of water, medicine, the ocean, food, space and so on. But it is very important when it is analogous to space. Again, like space, *Nibbāna* has no cause for origin and is unproduceable just as a man goes up to the Himalayas but he cannot bring the Himalayas to any place he likes.

According to the *Visuddhimagga*, *Nibbāna* has peace as its characteristic. Its function is immortality, or its function is to comfort. Its manifestation is signlessness, or non-conceptualization. All this may be regarded as the definition of *Nibbāna*. In his next discussion, Buddhaghosa has rejected the assertion that *Nibbāna* is non-existent or mythical. Here he argues that the mere non-comprehension of *Nibbāna* by an ordinary man does not mean that *Nibbāna* does not exist, for it would follow that the way to it is futile. Not that it is the absence of the five aggregates or mere absence of defilements. *Nibbāna* is again not destruction because otherwise *Arahantship* would be mere destruction; and *Nibbāna* would be rendered temporary, formed or conditioned and obtainable without right effort. And it is not so, because the noble path that causes destruction is not *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* being called destruction is just a metaphor. It has to be described in such a negative and indirect way on account of it extreme subtlety. Finally Buddhaghosa has pointed out that *Nibbāna* is not created by the path or anything else, because it is only reachable, not arousable, by the path, and it has no first beginning. It goes without saying that *Nibbāna* is permanent, immaterial and one only irrespective of whether it is viewed before and after the dissolution of the body. Therefore, according to Bhddhhaghosa Nibbana is not nihilistic, not mere destruction of defilement, and not created; it is eternal, and ultimately, indescribable.

3. An Example of the Gradual Path to *Nibbāna* in Combination

The following is an example of those who are following and realizing the Middle Path, i.e. The Eightfold Noble Path, summarized in

<Diagram No. 1> The Gradual Path to *Nibbāna*

Nibbāna
Fruition-Knowledge   Path-Knowledge Insight-Knowledge
1. Right View   2. Right Thought 3.WISDOM-FACTORS III. Purification of View --- VII. Purification of Knowledge and Vision
6. Right Effort   7. Right Mindfulness   8. Right Concentration 2. CONCENTRATION-FACTORS II. Purification of Mind
3. Right Speech   4. Right Bodily Action   5. Right Livelihood 1. MORALITY FACTORS I. Purification of Morality

the Threefold Training (namely, morality Factors, Concentration Factors and Wisdom Factors), should perpetually observe first the Morality Factors, then the Foundations of Mindfulness, which causes the Concentration Factors, followed by the Wisdom Factors, consisting of Purification and Insight Knowledge by graduation, in themselves. Finally they will attain to the Path Knowledge and Fruition Knowledge, as well as the Extinction of all Defilements and Sufferings, that is, NIBBANA.

II. Interpretative Methods on the Scriptures
of *Theravāda* Buddhism in Thailand

Thailand is the land of the yellow robe, because in 2002 C.E. Thailand had 36,117 Buddhist temples and 405,476 monks and novices. Buddhism in Thailand is known as *Theravada* Buddhism,4 "which can be

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4 Living Buddhism is divided into 2 broad traditions: the first one is called *Theravada* (Elders' words) Buddhism, which is also known as 'southern' Buddhism or Hinayana (small vehicle in the sense of being a conservative school) followed by over 100 million of people in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. And the second one is called *Acariyavada* (Later teachers' words) Buddhism, which is known as Mahayana (great vehicle in the sense of being a liberal school) Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism is further divided into 2 lines, (1) one is known also as 'eastern' Buddhism and followed by 500 to 1,000 million ofpeople in the East Asian tradition of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam; and (2) the other one is known as 'northern' Buddhism and followed by over 20 million in the Tibetan tradition (Gethin, 1998:1).

traced back to the eighteen schools of early Buddhism in the time of the Emperor Asoka, who supported the third Buddhist Council in India" (Bapat, 1987:98). Thailand, known in the past as *Siam*, is a small country with an area of approximately 200,000 square miles and a population of 63,000,000 million, out of which the Buddhists are 95 percent. The King, although a protector of all religions, namely Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, is a Buddhist, and he is the ultimate reference in administrative matters pertaining to the Buddhist Monastic Order. In 1956 His Majesty King Phumipol Adulyadet resided at Bovoranives temple as a monk for a period of two weeks, and by this action gave royal support to the observance of the Buddhist 2500th jubilee year (Nimanong, 2002:361-364).

At present in Thailand, there are two prominent Buddhist scholar monks, to whom Thai Buddhist revere and listen. One is Ven. *Bhikkhu* Buddhadasa5 or in short Buddhadasa and the other monk is the most venerable *Bhikkhu* Payutto6 or Payutto only. Payutto said that the history of the Thai nation is also the history of Buddhism. The Thai nation originated over 2,300 years ago. Also in that same period Buddhism came and has played an important part in the Thai history ever since (Payutto, 1990:11-13).

1. Buddhadasa's Interpretative Method of Human Language - Dhamma Language (*Phasakhon - Phasatham*):

There are two kinds of religion in Thailand, namely genuine or intellectual or doctrinal Buddhism and popular or cultural Buddhism. The cultural Buddhism is eventually a sort of hermeneutics for doctrinal

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5 Ven. Buddhadasa *Bhikkhu*'s Royal Ecclesiastical name is Dhammaghosacariya and he was born in 1906 in the Southern Province of Thailand and he went forth as a monk in 1926. He established the Forest *Dhamma* Center in order to practice Insight Meditation in 1932 and passed away in 1993.

6 Ven. Payutto *Bhikkhu*'s Royal Ecclesiastical name at present is PhraDhammapidok (Prayudh Payutto *Bhikkhu*), who is now the most accepted Thai Buddhist scholar monk in Thailand. He was born in 1939 in Thailand. He became a novice at the age of 13 and while still a novice completed the highest grade of Pali examination. He wrote more than 200 books, and one of those is entitled *A Buddhist Solution for the Twenty-first Century*, which earbed the 1994 UNESCO Prize for Peace Education.

Buddhism and vice versa. Buddhadasa distinguishes two hermeneutic levels of the Buddha's words in 'the Buddha's discourses' (*Suttapiṭaka*), calling these two levels as "human language - *dhamma* language." He gives the following definitions: "Everyday language is worldly language, the language of people who do not know *dhamma*. *Dhamma* language is the language spoken by people who have gained a deep insight into the truth or *dhamma*" (Buddhadasa, 1974:1). On the level of what Buddhadasa calls 'language of truth' (*phasatham*) there are many similarities among all religious adherents. Once Buddhadasa remarks:

> The problem with most people who profess to be religious is their limited degree of real understanding; hence they think and talk on the level of 'language of people' (*phasakhon*), which never go beyond appearances to the higher truth of faith. Christians, for example, must understand that the idea of God is a concept essentially beyond the understanding of men and, therefore, transcends our usual distinctions between good and evil, personal and impersonal (Buddhadasa, 1967:35-37).

The human language interpretation of a term is then simply its conventional or literal meaning while the same term's *dhamma* language rendering is its spiritual or symbolic sense. Buddhadasa used the distinction to argue that many of the traditional readings and interpretations of the Buddhist scriptures in Thailand remain at the literal or human language level. In his work Buddhdasa places more emphasis on the notion of *dhamma* language.

Let us consider some examples of his interpretations of the Buddha's teachings in the book known as *human language-dhamma language* in <Diagram No.2>.

It must be noted that Buddhdasa does not in fact completely deny the cosmological reality of heaven and hell. He says: "True enough, the heaven and hell of everyday language are realms outside - though don't ask me where - and they are attained after death. But the heaven and hell of *dhamma* language are to be found in the mind and may be attained anytime depending on one's mental make up" (Buddhadasa, 1982:61). Taken as a whole, Buddhadasa's *dhamma*-language

\<Diagram No. 2\> Comparisons of two languages

Nos.	Terms	Human Language	*Dhamma* Language
1	Buddha	Gotama	Truth or *Dhamma*
2	*Dhamma*	Books	Truth or The Buddha
3	*Sangha*	Monks	Their mental virtues
4	Religion	Temple	*Dhamma*
5	Work	Earning of a living	Mind training
6	*Nibbāna*	Place, city	Extinction of defilement
7	Devil	Monster	Defilement
8	Birth	Physical birth	Mental birth
9	Death	Physical death	Mental death
10	World	Earth	Worldly mental stage
11	God	A celestial being	The natural law
12.	Man	A creature with a body of a so-called human form	Certain high mental qualities
13	Life	Anything that is not yet dead	The truly deathless state
14	Hell	A region under the earth	Anyone who burns himself with anxiety

reinterpretation represents a systematic demythologization of the Buddhist scriptures whereby cosmological realms become psychological states and deities and demons are interpreted as individuals experiencing those states. Whenever a concept or term is traditionally interpreted in a way, which is at odds with a modernist or scientific worldview then that term or concept is demythologized and subjected to a *dhamma*-language reinterpretation. Buddhadasa's method of *dhamma* language is similar to Bultmann's method of demythologization, the purpose of which is to recover a meaning that is covered over by the garb of a physical cosmos, in which modern man no longer believes, i.e. the three-level universe of heaven earth, and hell (Palmer, 1981:468). Buddhadasa's two kinds of interpretation can be traced back to the *Nettipakarana* and the *Saddasaratthajalini* as mention earlier.

　　The real Buddhist is the one who can empty his mind, or in Thai "*cit-wang*." The theoretical pivot of Buddhadasa's reinterpretation or understanding of *Theravāda* doctrine is the notion of *cit-wang*, "voided-mind" or "freed-mind" of the self-centeredness that leads to

attachment, craving and suffering. *Cit-wang* denoted a state of mind, being detached or free from moral impurities and being in a state of peace and equanimity, the foundation of *Nibbāna*. For Buddhadasa, *cit-wang* is the key to understanding the religious goal of Buddhism and is the basis of the practice to attain that goal both in individual and in social life. He wrote a *dhammic* poem, which is still in the minds of Thai people:

> Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void,
> And then to the voidness give all of the fruits,
> Take food of the voidness as do Holy Saints:
> And lo! You are dead to yourself from the very beginning
> (Buddhadasa, N.D.:95).

In placing *cit-wang* at the centre of his presentation of *Theravāda* doctrine Buddhadasa has in fact drawn heavily on the concept "emptiness (*śūnyatā*)" of *Mahāyāna* and *Zen* Buddhist teachings. Surprisingly, Buddhadasa studied all schools of Buddhism as well as the major religious traditions. He wanted to unite all genuinely religious people in order to work together to help free humanity by destroying selfishness. He reminded the Buddhists that we should not think that the teaching of non-attachment is found only in Buddhism.

Thus, for Buddhadasa, the key to religious harmony is that each religion's doctrines should be interpreted correctly according to *dhamma* language. According to Buddhadasa, the real enemy of any religion is not other religions, but materialism that feeds on and cultivates the human instinct of selfishness for the sake of material development. Runaway materialism is what all religions should join hands against, for it has been the most powerful force in turning people away from spiritualism of all forms. The ultimate mission in Buddhadasa's life can be summed up in his Three Resolutions, posted at the entrance of Forest Meditation Center. They are: ① to help everyone to realize the essence of their own religion; ② to help develop mutual understanding between all religions; and ③ to help to lift the world out of materialism. Indeed, this is an authentic dialogue in a global age.

2. Payutto's Interpretative Method of "Ten Types of Critical Thinking"

Payutto *Bhikkhu* wrote a well-known book entitled *Buddha-Dhamma* and from then onwards he was recognized as "Sariputta Thera of Asia." In a section of his book, these ten types of critical thinking were elaborately described in supplement to the Eightfold Noble Path. He is always saying that what he proposed is not his own, but it has already existed in the *Tipiṭaka*, he just systematized it for the application in the present day to day life.

A. Critical thinking as the relative or ring method

This type of understanding is based on the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppāda*), which is taken as the main teaching in Buddhism and it is common to all Buddhist schools:

> Herein, monks, the well taught *Ariya* disciple states throughly and systematically the causal law: "This being, that comes to be. From arising of this, that arises. This not being that does not to be. From the cessation of this, that ceases" (*KS*. II.66).

B. Critical thinking as the analysis method

According to Payutto, this type of interpretation can be seen in the following statements as: "Just as, when the parts are rightly set, the word 'chariot' arose in our mind, so also it is our usage to say; 'A being' when the aggregates are there" (*KS*. I.170).

C. Critical thinking on three streams of all things

It generates the insight of mind and leads to dispassion and purification of mind. Sometimes it combines with the first and the second method.

"Do you apply your mind thoroughly, monks, to body and regard it in its true nature as impermanent. He who so applies his mind thoroughly to body, and so regards it, feels disgust at the body: By the destruction of the lure of it comes destruction of lust. By destruction of the lust comes the destruction of the lure and by destruction of the lure the mind is set free, and it is called well freed and so for the other four factors (feeling, perception, activities, consciousness)" (*S*. III.52).

D. Critical thinking as a problem-solving method

"This is suffering. Wisely attends. ⋯ This is the origin of suffering. ⋯ This is the extinction of suffering. ⋯ This is the path to the extinction of suffering. Because he wisely attends thus, the three fetters decline: the wrong view as to one's own body, doubt and adherence to (wrong) rites and ceremonies" (*M*. I.9-10).

E. Critical thinking on the relation between theory and practice

This is the way to stability in Buddhism in the real sense and the way of intellectual progress.

"Monks, these five things lead to stability of *Saddhamma*. What five? Carefully the monks hear *Dhamma*; carefully they master it; carefully they bear it in mind; carefully they test the good of things borne in mind; knowing the good and *Dhamma*; carefully they go their way in *Dhamma* by *Dhamma*" (*GS*. II.250-251).

F. Critical thinking on all things in three dimensions, namely satisfaction, disadvantage, and freedom

Whatever happiness arises in consequence of the five strands of sense-pleasures. This is satisfaction. Suffering derived from the sense-pleasures is known as disadvantage. The control and the getting

rid of the desire and attachment are known as the escape from sensual pleasures (*M.* I.83-91).

G. Critical thinking on true value and artificial value, for using four requisite

The Buddha has advised his disciples as follows:

"In this Teaching, monks, a reflective monk, uses a robe simply for warding of the cold, for warding off the heat, for warding the touch of gadfly, mosquito, wind and sun, creeping things, simply for the sake of covering his nakedness.

Wisely reflective, he uses alms-food not for sport, not for indulgence, not for personal charm, not for beautification, but just enough for the support and sustenance of the body, for keeping it unharmed, for furthering the Brahma-faring, thinking: Thus do I crush former feeling and do not set going new feeling; and there will for me faultlessness and living in comfort.

Wisely reflective, he uses lodging only for warding off the cold, warding off the heat, for warding off the touch of gadfly, mosquito, wind, sun and creeping things, only for dispelling the dangers of the seasons, for the purpose of enjoying seclusion.

Wisely reflective, he uses the requisite of medicines for the sick, for warding off injurious feelings that have arisen, for the maximum of well-being" (*M.* I.10).

H. Critical thinking as reflective attention on developing psychic moral factors

This is part of the new thought in Buddhism. Personal awakening to do good things is necessary in *Dhamma*-faring (*MLS.* I.15).

I. Critical thinking as here and now in the present

The practice of *Satipatthana* is taken as the one and only way for the purification of all beings, for overcoming sorrow, and lamentation,

for destruction of suffering and grief, for attaining the right, for realizing of *Nibbāna* (*D*. II. *Sutta* No.22).

J. Critical thinking as critical method

Systematic thought according to this method depends upon the fact, factor, moment, relation between cause and effect or condition (*M*. II.197).

Examples of Payutto's interpretation of the Buddhist Doctrine: Ven. Payutto *Bhikkhu* applied the "critical thinking as here and now in the present moment" to interpret the Buddha's Doctrine of Dependent Origination in a Daily Life. Normally, the doctrine of Dependent Origination used to be interpreted from birth to birth, but Payutto could put it in the aspect of here and now (Payutto, 1995:112-135).

Payutto introduces the idea of social *kamma* by his own reflection on the danger of attachment to views or dogmatic opinions (*ditthuppadana*). According to him, the ideology is based on the dogmatic opinions or wrong view. He commented: "In the preceding decades we experienced problems with ideologies. There were two major schools, which had split the world into camps. Now the contention between these ideologies has petered out, but we have not resolved the problems of nationalism, racism and sectarianism. So we come back to the problem of dogmatic opinion or ideology to find a solution" (Payutto, 1993:7). According to him, three dogmatic opinions or wrong views have controlled modern civilization. The first is the wrong perception towards nature that humankind is separated from nature and must control nature according to its desires. The second is the wrong perception denying that there are fellow human beings: to be a human being is to have desire, reason, and self-esteem (Fukuyama, 1992:165). The last wrong perception concerns the objective of life, namely, that happiness is dependent on an abundance of material possessions (Payutto, 1993:7). He said thus: "Being held under the power of these three wrong perceptions, their resulting actions become *kamma* on the social level"

(Payutto, 1993:8). This is the new understanding of *kamma* in the global age. According to Payutto, in the past decades, natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities were influenced by the afore-mentioned wrong views, therefore humankind at present is encountering many problems of nature and environment, conflicts and competition. According to him, when right view is incorporated into the mind of people and even into sciences and branches of learning, all those people's minds and branches of learning will be well-based. For example, the physical sciences, applied sciences and technology would have a relationship with nature that is characterized by a pure desire for knowledge, rather than an impure desire to exploit nature.

3. Kirti's Bunchua's Five Different Ways of Scriptural Interpretations

Kirti Bunchua tries to combine Contextuality Method with Hemeneutics and to extend the application to all Scriptures in his "Contextual Religions."[7]

A. Literal Interpretation

The religious interpreter of this level understands the Scriptures faithfully according to the meaning of the words and grammatical structure of the language.

For example, "Buddha, at his birth, walked 7 steps immediately upon 7 lotus flowers", means that he really stood up and walked forward and under his feet there appeared the real 7 lotus flowers. One more example, "Indra, in his Dusita Heaven, has 84,000 fairies as his consorts", means exactly that number of wives together with such a supernatural kingdom rewarded to a man who had offered his pond for public use, after his departure from this World.

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7 Prof. Kirti Bunchua is now Head of Philosophy Department at St. John University in Thailand, he is a Catholic but interested in Hermeneutics of all kinds. His well-known theory is Religious and Philosophical Contextualism based on the five paradigms of Primitive, Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary.

B. Contextual Interpretation

This level understands the scriptures conforming to the ancient paradigm of human thought that is trying to understand everything under some rules that are known by the interpreters. The known rules are the context for understanding. When the *Tipiṭaka* says: "Buddha, at his birth, walked 7 steps immediately upon 7 lotus flowers", we cannot take the word "walked 7 steps" literally as ordinary human walks, with right and left legs, the walk may signify his Enlightenment and incomparable perfection of both physicality and mentality. "Indra has 84,000 fairy consorts" means that, according to the Indian cultural context, he has the right to enjoy to his full satisfaction. In the same way "for eternity" may mean very very long period, so long that we can neglect its consumption.

C. Symbolical Interpretation

This level conforms to the medieval paradigm which states that this life should be sacrificed for the benefit of the next life. Therefore, what are written as ordinary language in the scriptures are only symbols of the spiritual values for eternal life. Each person has to put into practice what he understands according to the level of his understanding. When the text says: "Buddha, at his birth, walked 7 steps immediately upon 7 lotus flowers", it symbolizes the Buddha's ability to preach his *Dhamma* throughout the seven continents or throughout the world.

D. Rational Interpretation

It conforms to the fourth paradigm of human thoughts, that is, trying to give scientific reason to every statement. Scriptures also must be evaluated rationally, by always asking the question "how and why?" How did the Buddha walk 7 steps immediate after his birth? Why in 7

steps? The more men reason, the more they dispute and the more their mentality is far away from the religious virtues.

E. Literary-form Interpretation

There is no fixed form for this kind of interpretation; the only fixed rule is to take in consideration the context of the writer; his intention of writing and the literary form he chooses to express his intention. The context of the writer consists of the external context (social, political, economical and cultural atmosphere), and internal context (psychological construction and philosophical paradigms).

Using this method, a mythology must be interpreted as a mythology, an epic must be interpreted as an epic, a romantic poem must be interpreted as a romantic and poetic expressions. The same can be said about other literary forms, such as, chronicles, letters, personal diaries, sermons, homilies, conversations, dialogues, essays, mystical experiences or supernatural phenomena (the two last items are called altogether "Religious Experiences." Some passages may be classified under several categories.

In short, the fifth interpretation does not deny the technique of the four previous methods. Each of them, however, has to be implemented in the context of each passage of the Scriptures.

III. Interpretative Examples of Controversial Doctrines in the Buddhist Scriptures

1. The 1st Question

What is Non-Attachment of the Self? To answer this question, the interpretative methods of "*Cause and Conditions*", "*Methods in the Guide*", "*Methods in the Path of Purification*", will have to be applied for the understanding of the relation between "Non-attachment" and "the Non-Self."

Some said that the Buddha did not deny the self, but did deny

the attachment to the self. In other words, the Buddha eventually emphasized on the non-attachment of the self. To solve this problem, let's come to the discussion of how to understand the doctrine of non-attachment in Buddhism. It is possible to understand non-attachment in relation to attachment. Generally speaking, attachment to someone or something is a feeling of affection that one has for them. In other words, attachment to a particular cause or ideal is a strong feeling of belief in and loyalty to it. Particularly in Buddhism the idea of attachment means clinging to or grasping after, and is classified as of four kinds, namely ① attachment to sensuality or sense desire, ② to views or dogmatic opinions, ③ to mere rule and ritual or belief in the efficacy of rites and rituals, and ④ to ego-belief (*D*. III.230). The last is more essential than the first three aspects. Therefore, non-attachment can be best understood under the rejection of a permanent self or the ego-belief through an analysis of the psycho-physical combination of human life.

According to Buddhism, everything in this world functions under five natural laws (*DA*. II.432). The first four laws are essentially included in the fifth one, the *dhammic* law, which analytically can be both conditional and non-conditional. The conditional law is subject to change and cannot be controlled, but both conditional and non-conditional laws are non-self (*A*. I.285). Buddhism does not accept the autonomous self of Hinduism or the Upanisadic thinkers, who say that the self is the inner controller of mind and body or in totality a person (*Brh. Up*. III, 7. 16-22). According to Buddhism, the concept of person, when analyzed, is found to consist of five aggregates of materiality, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness, which are changing, subject to suffering and not able to be grasped as a self (*S*. XXII.59). Hence the so-called person is a mere *collection of the five aggregates* or in short known a the psycho-physical combination (*Vism*. XVIII.593-94).

For Buddhism, the phenomenal world is in the state of continuos flux. All things, without exception, are nothing but chains of momentary events, instantaneous 'bits' of existence. "There is no Being, there is

only a Becoming", said Rhys Davids (1976:56). Precisely, we can say that, the Upanisadic notion of being (sat), the Husserlian transcendental ego and the Sartrean conception of being-in-itself are not acceptable to the Buddhist (Mererk, 1988:111). According to Buddhism, all phenomena are subject to the laws of causation.[8] There is nothing haphazard or predetermined. Every element, though appearing only for a single moment, is a dependently-originating-ceasing element because it depends for its arising and ceasing on what has gone before it. "Dependent Origination-cessation (causation) is said to have the characteristics of objectivity, necessity, invariability and conditionality" (*S.* XII.20). Therefore, the doctrine of dependent origination-cessation or causation and the analysis of the five aggregates gives support to the non-self doctrine.

Moreover, the Buddhist has a practical purpose in rejecting the self-theory. Like the other teachings of the Buddha, the non-self doctrine has *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāṇa*) or the cessation of sufferings as its purpose. In relation to the doctrines of *kamma* and *Nibbāna*, questions may be asked: if there is no self as agent, what is it that performs action, accumulates and experiences the result of action? According to Buddhism, intentional consciousness performs action and also accumulates the result of action. When action produces result, it is consciousness that experiences it, but consciousness, which performs an action, is not identical with consciousness, which experiences the result. In fact they are neither the same nor different due to the law of conditionality. To say that the doer of action and the experiencer of the result are absolutely the same is to hold the eternalistic view, and to say that the two are entirely different is to hold the annihilationistic view (*S.* XII.2.18).

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8 This causal law can be expressed by a formula: "when this is, that is; this arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases." Its general principle can be illustrated by a series of twelve factors: "Conditioned by ignorance are mental and *kammic* formations ⋯ . Conditioned by birth are old age, death, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair ⋯ . Through the cessation of ignorance, mental and *kammic* formation cease ⋯ . Through the cessation birth, old age, death, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair cease" (*M.* III.63).

2. The 2nd Question

If the mind-body combination is not self, then who realizes *Nibbāna*? According to Buddhism, there is no self as a thinker behind the thought; it is the thought that thinks. In like manner, there is no self behind the realization of *Nibbāna*; it is wisdom that realizes *Nibbāna*. When wisdom, which is one of mental formations, is developed by means of Insight Meditation it sees the reality of things as impermanent, suffering and non-self. When the reality is seen, the concept of the phenomenal world is destroyed (*M*. III.244). Ignorance, desire and attachment are eradicated and in their places arises wisdom. Then all forces that produce the series of rebirths in ignorance are calmed down and unable to generate *kammic* energy, because there is no more attachment and desire for existence. As such, *Nibbāna* is regarded as the realization of things as they are: "Not constituting, not thinking out for being or for non-being, man grasps after nothing in the world; not grasping, he is not troubled; being untroubled, he himself atttains *Nibbāna*" (*M*. III.244). This is the doctrine of non-attachment, which is the mode of Buddhist thinking.

The above interpretation is possible according to the methods of "Analysis" and "the Two-cornered Question."

3. The 3rd Question

"Since *Nibbāna* is regarded as the 'authentic cessation of existence', Is *Nibbāna* viewed as annihilation or not?" *Nibbāna* is not self-annihilation, for there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of the ignorance, desire and attachment of self. As the Buddha said: "In this respect one may rightly say of me that I teach annihilation. For certainly I do teach annihilation of greed, hatred, and delusion, as well as of the manifold evil and unwholesome things" (*A*. III.12). All schools of Buddhism apparently deny the ontology of all phenomena, but they differ from each other in the aspect of the ontology of *Nibbāna*. As Ven. Phramaha Prayoon Mererk[9] said, "the

followers of the Buddha, however, hold different views on the ontological status of *Nirvāṇa*" (Mererk, 1988:160-163). The *Sautrāntika*, for example, holds that *Nirvāṇa* does not have a positive reality; it is nothingness. Just as space is the absence of a solid body or anything tangible, so also *Nirvāṇa* is the absence of causes that are responsible for rebirth. Unlike the *Sautrantika*, the *Yogācāra* maintains that *Nirvāṇa* has a positive reality; it is not nothingness. The realization of *Nirvāṇa* eliminates the unreality of the phenomenal world, but at the same time it is a discovery of store-consciousness (*Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra*, 62) (Mererk, 1988:160). *Yogācāra's* idea of store-house is identical to the Upanisadic conception of *ātman*. Rejecting both different ideas, *Theravāda* Buddhism maintains that *Nibbāna* is not non-existence, but it is a transcendental entity, independently existent. It is an external, unchangeable state which exists by itself. Buddhaghosa of Sri Lanka rejects the view that *Nibbāna* is non-existent. According to him, a mere fact that *Nibbāna* is not apprehended by an ordinary man does not prove that *Nibbāna* does not exist. *Nibbāna* can be seen by the right means (the way of morality, concentration and wisdom) (*Vism.* XVI.508). *Nibbāna* is not non-existence; rather it is positive, permanent reality.

Thus, *Nibbāna* as conceived in early Buddhism is not non-existence or utter annihilation. It is the realm of being, which transcends the phenomenal world (Mererk, 1988:162). This is to use the method of Analysis with the method of simile.

4. The 4th Question

What is the meaning of Buddha's silence? This question can be understood through two discourses, concerned with the questions, and later coined as undetermined questions. In Buddhism, not only is the reality of *Nibbāna* indescribable, but also the destiny of the liberated

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9 His Royal Ecclesiastic Name is PhraThepsopon (Prayoon Dhammacitto [Mererk]) and he is now appointed as the Rector of Mahachula Buddhist University, Bangkok ,Thailand, which has 14 University Branches over Thailand. He was born in 1955, became a novice at the age of 12. While being a novice he graduated with the highest degree of the Thai traditional Pali studies IX and the King sponsored his higher ordination in the Chapel Royal. He got his M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. from Delhi University, India. He is a monk of learning and administrating.

person (*arahant*), i.e. one who attains *Nibbāna*. In the time of the Buddha, a Brahmin came to ask the Buddha the following four questions:

① The liberated one exists after death.
② The liberated one does not exist after death.
③ The liberated one exists and does not exist after death.
④ The liberated one neither exists nor does not exist after death (*M*. I.484).

The Buddha did not give a specific answer to any of these questions. One of the reasons for the 'silence' of the Buddha is that the phrases 'exists', 'does not exist', etc., are misleading, because they have a spatio-temporal connotation and hence are inapplicable to *Nibbāna*, which is beyond space and time and cannot be located. The mystery of the liberated person lies in the fact that he is no longer identified with any of the five aggregates by which the ordinary person is known. The descriptions of his destiny in terms of the four alternatives mentioned above are out of place (Mererk, 1988:163).

Another set of the undetermined questions was asked by another Brahmin: "Is the world eternal, or is it not? Is it finite, or is it not? Is life in the body, or in the soul? Do beings continue after death, or do they not?" The Buddha explained that if he did not speak of them, it was because they did not come within the ambit of his primary concern. His primary concern was limited to a more urgent need for humanity. Then the Buddha narrated an example: "Imagine that a man is going through a jungle. Halfway through he is shot by a poisoned arrow. If the poisoned arrow remains in his body, he will die. The injured man say: 'I will not pull out this arrow until I know who shot it, whether he is tall or short, fat or lean, young or old, of a high caste or a low caste.' The man will die before he knows the right answers" (*M*. I.427). Gautama viewed human suffering, and the liberation from it, exactly as modern psychologists and physician would look at mental or bodily patients in their clinics (Fernando and Swidler, 1986:105). The method of Parable is prominent here.

IV. Buddhist Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue

Actually Buddhism does show the pluralistic view by proposing that all religions are equal in respect of making common reference to one single ultimate truth, which the Buddha had discovered. The Buddha as the discoverer of the truth, has opened the possibility for others to discover the truth for themselves. Because the Buddha as one who discovers the truth rather than as one who has a monopoly of the truth, is clearly a source of tolerance. It leaves open the possibility for others to discover aspects of the truth, or even the whole truth, for themselves. The Buddhist acceptance of Individual Buddhas or *Pacceka Buddhas*, who discover the truth by themselves, is a clear admission of this claim. Thus other religions are equal in respect of offering means to truth or liberation or salvation. This idea paves the way for religious pluralism. Peter Byrne in his book entitled "*Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*" mentioned the standard viewpoints of religious pluralism are as followed:

> ① All major religions are equal in respect of making common reference to single transcendent, ② all major religions are likewise equal in respect of offering some means to human salvation and liberation; and ③ all religions are to be seen as containing limited account of nature of the sacred; none is certain enough in its particular dogmatic formulations to provide the norm for interpreting the others (Byrne, 1995:12).

Pluralism[10] is the middle way beyond exlusivism and inclusivism. Hick is the eminent pluralist who has considered exclusive and inclusive ways of Catholic thinking are no longer practical and impossible. He said religions are looking over the important thing that is "the Ultimate Reality", which he affirmed that there is one divine reality or *dhamma* in Buddhism (Hick, 1990:115). For the Buddhist, to see unity in

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10 Pluralism is the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality centeredness is taking place in different ways within the contexts of all the great religious traditions (Whaling, 1986:153).

diversity is not sufficient to solve the religious conflicting truth claims. To put in *dhamma* language theory, we have to step beyond the one and many. That is to say we have to go beyond Hick's theory of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This is the middle way of pluralism. It is said that the distinction between human language and *dhamma* language provides an interesting approach to inter-religious understanding or interfaith dialogue.

> The primary objective of dialogue is to remove barriers of differences among religions and exchange ideas. Dialogue is an unending patience. The process of dialogue is that of learning how to coexist peacefully with each other. "By the dialogue, each culture presents its variety and difference, on the dialogue, a new idea of human being's co-existence and also a new humankind culture mode are coming into being" (Shipeng, 2003:5).

The spirit of tolerance, charity and freedom is characteristic of the "dialogue of the Buddha." It is especially evident in the *Kalama Sutta* (*A.* I.189). From *Kalama Sutta*, one may conclude that there were varieties of religious beliefs in the Buddha's days. People have a great opportunity to examine and verify the teachings of many religious scholars in order to find out which way was suitable for them and which way was the road to the ultimate truth. When the different religious beliefs were clashed, dialogue is most desirable in situation of religious pluralism, for the purpose of mutual understanding and enrichment, for dispelling suspicion and prejudices, and for harnessing moral and spiritual values and so on.

A close reading of Buddhadasa's works does reveal the operation of some implicit criteria, which are sociological, in that he bases judgements of the inaccuracy of traditional readings of the scriptures and of the accuracy of his *dhamma* language readings on the social and religious consequences of those respective interpretations. He thereby regards ending social problems that hinder improvements in human well-being as fundamentally a religious matter, saying that:

> The true objective of the founders of all religions with regard to the completion or perfection of what is most useful and needful for humanity is not being achieved, because the followers of the respective religions interpret the languages of *dhamma* wrongly, having preserved wrong interpretations and preached wrongly to such an extent that the world has been facing turmoil and problems created by the conflicts among religions.

According to Buddhadasa, the anthropomorphized concept of God in Christianity is only one rendering of ultimate reality on the level of human language. In the *Dhamma* language, God is transcends our usual distinctions between good and evil, personal and impersonal. To know God is to know things as they really are or from the perspective of the divine (Buddhadasa, 1967:63). In Buddhadasa's view, Jesus like the Buddha, was in favour of the middle way, he lived it and taught or persuaded his followers to live it in order to avoid the extreme of being too loose or too strict in attitude and conduct. For example, such a middle way can be seen in the Bible: "Bend your necks to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and your souls will find relief. For my yoke is good to bear, my load is light" (Matthew 11/29-30 in Buddhadasa, 1967:53).

The sense of non-attachment as the middle way of dialogue can be seen through the speech of Dalai Lama. Regarding the conflict between China and Tibet with reference to Tibet's independence, the Dalai Lama has made clear that he no longer seeks independence for Tibet, and that he is committed to "the Middle Way." He has also said that the concerns of the Tibetan people could be addressed within the framework of the People's Republic of China (Craig, 2003:A23).

V. Comparative Conclusion

In conclusion, there is hermeneutics in Buddhism, because there are Buddhist texts and they contained many controversial stories of the Buddha. David E. Klemm, in his book *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, wrote a sentence which accommodates all four main types of hermeneutics as "I

understand you (the texts)" (Klemm, 1986:introduction page). The first type is called "Hermeneutics as Interpretation." Hermeneutics becomes *theory of interpretation* when the focus of inquiry is *on the meaning* understood ("you"). It primarily asks about the intention of the author or what the original audience understood; it seeks invariant meaning. Schleiermacher emphasized on the hermeneutics as 'you' or 'texts', which focuses on Author's intention in writing the text. To read the text is to understand the author's intention. The second one is known as "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy." Hemeneutics becomes *practical philosophy* (ethics) when the focus of inquiry shifts to the *activity of understanding* ("*understand*"). It primarily asks about the meaning of the understanding process as the basic way humans interact with themselves and their world; it seeks authentic human life. Gadamer emphasized on the hermeneutics as 'understand'. He said that hermeneutics is a kind of an understanding itself. His main focus is on the text instead of author's intention. As Gadamer said actually we do not read the text, but the text reads us. This type of hermeneutics emphasizes on interaction between the text and the reader. The third type is known as "Hermeneutics as Speculative Ontology." Hermeneutics becomes *speculative ontology* when the focus of inquiry shifts again to *the subject of understanding* ("I"). It primarily asks about the meaning of being itself as this is reflected in the understanding "I"; it seeks to understand the whole of being. Heidegger emphasized on the hermeneutics as "I". Hermeneutics for him is 'human being' itself. He focuses on the reader of the text. The last type is known as "Hermeneutics as Theology." Hermeneutics becomes *theology* when *the whole structure of understanding is overturned within any of the three types*. It primarily asks about the depth dimension of ① understood meanings, ② the understanding process, and ③ the whole of being; it seeks to understand appearances of the divine. The 4th type is the hermeneutics as Theology. It can be compared with the Buddhist hermeneutics as '*Buddhology*' or '*Dhammology*'. Every things both conditioned and non-conditioned are included in '*Dharma*' or '*Dhamma*'.

The divergent points between Buddhist hermeneutics and the

general hermeneutics may be thus: Buddhist hermeneutics accepts 2 levels of truth, the conventional and ultimate truths. The author's intention, the text, the reader are recognized in the conventional sense of the terms. In the ultimate truth or *Dhamma*, none of them is to be grasped after. Only non-attachment or emptiness is most emphasized in the Buddhist hermeneutics. It can be said that the unique characteristic of Buddhist hermeneutics is known as "general hermeneutics,"[11] the effort of which is to form a general and universal methodology based on a coherent and correspondent philosophy of understanding. The well-known book 'the Guide' or *Nettipakarana* serves as a set of 'canons' for interpretation.[12] Buddhist hermeneutics can accommodate both Schleiermacher's theory of the author's intention and Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizon, because the former is identical to the *Theravāda* Buddhist theory of "gradual path" and the latter is to the *Mahāyāna's* theory of "skillful means." The Buddhist hermeneutics does not ignore the author's intention, because the Buddha is there as a human being. At the same time, the Buddhist hermeneutics opens the opportunity for the fusion of horizon, because the non-self or emptiness is there as a becoming process. Therefore, the Buddhist hermeneutics starts from the author's intention to emptiness (Lopez, 1988:65).

Buddhism accepts both social self (everyday ritual) and social non-self (Beyond everyday ritual), because as it has been already said that there are two sorts of truth in Buddhism, namely conventional truth (indirect meaning) and ultimate truth (direct meaning) with special emphasis on the latter. To say that Buddhism pays more attention to the ultimate truth or social non-self is not to mean that Buddhists ignore the social self. The social self can be understood in terms of 'deference', which means acknowledging the values of other

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11 Palmer divides hermeneutics into three fairly distinct categories: regional hermeneutics, general hermeneutics, and philosophical hermeneutics (Palmer, 1981:461-2).

12 In the *Nettipakarana*, every discourse contains two aspects, namely, verbal content (*byanjana*) and meaning (*attha*). Of them words consist of letters, verbal content, etymology, presentation (*nidesa*) and manner (*akara*). Meaning consists of the following six: explaining (*sankasana*), displaying (*pakasana*), divulging (*vivarana*), analysing (*vibhajana*), exhibiting (*uttanikamma*), and sesignating (*pannatti*). These six are called thread. Modes of conveying the meaning are sixteen: Conveying teaching (*desanahara*), investigation (*vicayahara*) and so on.

person as well as of our own selves. The deference also means supportive interchange or a situation of social interaction, such as greetings, offer of help, remedial interchange and so on (Goffman, 1959:240). This social self is known in Buddhism as social ethic elucidated in the Buddhist text (*Sn*. 259-268). For example, one of 38 highest blessings is reverence, respect or appreciative action, which is grasped in the context of the social self. But in addition to the social self, the Buddha teaches another social non-self, which means forgiveness or non-attachment to the social self. Whenever the social self disappoints one, then the social non-self can help release such a disappointment. The social non-self is a sense of forgiveness, love, non-attachment, which stay beyond expectation of the consequence of our actions. Self-identity in the light of right understanding through the self awareness or heedfulness must be cultivated to solve the problem of conflict occurring all over the world. Fr. McLean's sense of Heidegger's *Dasein* or Buddhism's Heedfulness (*appamada*) is: "Done well this can be a historic step ahead for humanity; done poorly it can produce a new round of human conflict and misery."

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