
**REREADING *THE THREE WORLDS ACCORDING TO KING RUANG* BASED UPON ITS ROOTS
IN THE TIPITAKA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of Thai Buddhist cosmology contained in the old manuscript named, *the Traibhumikatha* (*Tebhumikatha*). This manuscript had been compiled and revised for first public edition in 1912. The final text was entitled *the Trai Phum Phra Ruang* and it has been translated into English in 1979 as *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*. The dissemination of this text began since the rise of Thai kingdom, thus it is regarded as one of the literary classics of Thai culture. The text has often been interpreted as an attempt to make Theravada Buddhism more accessible to the masses. It subsequently has been appropriated by folk culture as documenting the literal existence of heavens and hells and the accumulation of merits through several lifetimes. This paper aims to move beyond this more superficial reading of text to a deeper interpretation based upon the concept of impermanence (*Anicca*) which is a dominant concept of Theravada Buddhism. Impermanence represents a cosmological view based on the law of three marks of existence (*Tilakkhana*). It also determines the features of time, space, and beings as contingent and not independent of other things. Therefore, it is used in this study as a key to disclose a new meaning of this text based upon its deeper narrative, the Tipitaka. And with the notions

applied from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory, the rereading of this text represents an attempt to fill the gaps in the traditional interpretation which overlooks the attainment of Nibbana at present lifetime and in modern interpretation which lacks a sociocultural dimension.

Keywords: Tebhumikatha; Three Worlds According to King Ruang; Thai Buddhist Cosmology

Introduction

The Three Worlds According to King Ruang (*Trai Phum Phra Ruang*)¹ is a Thai literary work concerning with Theravada Buddhist cosmology. It was composed in the 14th century, presumably by King Lithai of the House of Phra Ruang. Being written in Thai makes it distinct from other Theravada cosmological texts written in Pali in accordance with the Buddhist scholastic tradition. This might contribute to its popularity because it made the Three Worlds more accessible to laypeople who did not understand Pali. In brief, the Three Worlds is a compendious narrative joining a cosmological system with moral system. The author applied several ideas from the Tipitaka suttas to construct a comprehensive worldview and used it to guide the people about how to live their lives properly in such a world. The contents of the Three Worlds range over the metaphysical cosmos at large to the human world. It expounds the Theravada contents such as the nature of beings in this cosmos, the origin of mankind, the origin of human society, the fall of mankind, the cosmic destruction, and the rebirth of cosmos, including the salvation or the paths to liberate oneself from this cosmos.

Nevertheless, due to the change of worldview since the time of scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, people have become increasingly skeptical about certain religious beliefs. They considered many religious beliefs as superstition and sought to demystify those beliefs to make them rationally acceptable. In the context of Thailand, one can see the emergence of monastic reform led by King Mongkut (Rama IV)

in 1833 as an example of modern influence on Thai traditional religion. The Dhammayuttika Nikaya established by him can be seen as a modern monastic order having aspirations different from the older orthodox order (Maha Nikaya) such as “seeking for the authentic teachings and practices of the historical Buddha, upholding the extra monastic rules more than orthodox monks, supporting the monks to learn the Dhamma with modern education, and being skeptical towards the superstitious elements in the traditional teachings.”² Another obvious influence of modern perspective on Buddhism in Thailand in the contemporary time can be seen from the book named the ‘*Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham*’ (*Human language - Dhamma language*) which is the record of sermons preached by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. The contents of this book are mainly about demythologizing the metaphysical terms in Buddhist texts. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu proposed an idea that one should not interpret the Buddhist terms in literal sense (the so-called *human language*) which represents “the secular understanding of people who do not understand the Dhamma.”³ Rather one should interpret the Buddhist terms based on the so-called *Dhamma language* which represents “the intellectual understanding of people who know the truth of Dhamma.”⁴

Since the late 20th century, the modern interpretation of Buddhist texts in Thailand had been influenced by the works of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. He was not only an expert in the Tipitaka, he was also knowledgeable in Western science, and philosophy. One of his internationally famous writings is *The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, which was compiled from his sermons, then delivered to students of medical science, and was awarded a prize by UNESCO in 1965. A significant sermon is entitled *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham*. This sermon was an attempt to demythologize traditional religious terms such as those used in the Three Worlds. He teaches that religious terms that are interpreted in the traditional sense of the *Phasa Khon* should be reinterpreted to be less superstitious, namely as symbols or metaphors of modern psychological states in the sense of the *Phasa Tham*.⁵

Table 1. Examples of the Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham Interpretation⁶

No.	Buddhist Terms	Meaning according to the Phasa Khon (premodern interpretation as traditional understanding)	Meaning according to the Phasa Tham (modern interpretation as defined by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu)
1.	Mara	lord of evil	obstacle to enlightenment
2.	Loka	space, land, world	suffering (Dukkha)
3.	Death	the end of life	the end of self
4.	Deva	celestial beings	laws of nature
5.	Hell	the underworld	anger, dissatisfaction
6.	Heaven	pleasant realms of gods	attachment to sensory pleasure
7.	Peta	hungry ghosts	Greed
8.	Asura	Demon	fear, anxiety
9.	Tiracchana	Animal	ignorance
10.	Sunyata	Emptiness	absence of ego, non-self
11.	Nibbana	ideal ultimate state, ideal heavenly realm	the absence of suffering
12.	Buddha	The historical Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama Buddha	The teachings of Buddha, (Based on the Buddha's quote that "One who sees the Dhamma, sees me" which implies that the true identity of the Buddha is the Dhamma, not his personhood.)

Moreover, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu also placed an emphasis on the attainment of Nibbana in the present lifetime. An example of this is his sermon "*Nibbana, here and now*"⁷ in which he contrasts his notion of Nibbana to the traditional understanding expound in the Three Worlds, the Phra Malai Sutta, and the Jataka tales that the attainment of Nibbana relied on the notion of merits accumulated through several lifetimes.

In summary, the interpretation of Buddhist texts as proposed by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu reflects the attempt to promote a version of Theravada Buddhism in line with modern perspective in the sense that it is less superstitious and is psychologically verifiable. In such a way, his teachings have become popular among people upholding a modern perspective whether they be Thais or those interested in Buddhism from other parts of the world.

Critique of the interpretation based on the *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham*

Although the modern interpretation of Buddhist texts in accordance with the *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham* theory does not cause serious conflicts among most Buddhists, it has been criticized by the traditionalists. They contend that Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's interpretation is too reductive and it undermines the sacrality of Buddhism. An example of this view can be seen from Sathianphong Wannapok's criticism of the *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham*. He writes:

If the Dhamma language is true and the human language is false, such a view is too extreme. There will be no historical Buddha if the term 'Buddha' is interpreted as the enlightened state, and the notion of 'rebirth' in the afterlife will be merely understood as the presence and the absence of ego at the present lifetime."⁸

Sathianphong Wannapok an acclaimed Thai expert on the Tipitaka, has four criticisms of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's approach.

- 1) Concerning Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's emphasis on the enlightenment at the present lifetime, Sathianphong pointed out that "it is similar to Zen Buddhism, Buddhadasa himself might be the first Thai monk who had translated the Mahayana texts into Thai which are the Sutra of Wei-Lang (Huineng) and the teaching of Huangbo Xiyun."⁹ This comment can imply that Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's teachings seem to be influenced by Mahayana doctrine, rather than reflecting the traditional Theravada doctrine.

- 2) Concerning the *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham*, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu refers to the Lord Buddha's quote that "*Those who are sage are not imprudent, they know how to use the two senses of meaning.*" This quote suggests that Lord Buddha himself accepts both senses of meaning and one should know how to use them appropriately. However, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's refusal of the *Phasa Khon* seems not to be in line with Lord Buddha's quote."¹⁰
- 3) Concerning Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's sermons as promoting religious inclusivism, Sathianphong remarked that "Although it is by his good will to promote peace and mutual understanding among world religions, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's interpretation of Christianity by using his Buddhist point of view may distort the original understanding of Christianity and it can cause discord rather than harmony since there are some Christians who would refuse such interpretation"¹¹
- 4) Concerning Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's teachings about the afterlife, Sathianphong gave a remark that "Some of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's sermons seem to contradict with one another i.e., sometimes he ... does not refuse the belief of rebirth and the afterlife, but sometimes he taught that only the fool would understand rebirth in the afterlife, the wise would understand rebirth as here and now successively."¹²

Nevertheless, Sathianphong supports Buddhadasa Bhikkhu concerning the idea that both aspects of rebirth and the nature of mind are in accordance with the Tipitaka, namely "The mind as instantaneous-self is in line with the Abhidhamma Pitaka, whereas the mind as unified self which can be reborn in the afterlife is in line with the Sutta Pitaka and the commentaries written by Buddhaghosa."¹³ The differing views about nature of mind and its implication on rebirth is a major controversial issue in Buddhist philosophy. Sathianphong explained that "Actually Buddhaghosa explained both views in his writings, but he had placed little emphasis on the mind as instantaneous-self (maybe because this

view was commonly known already), and he explained in detail the mind as unified-self existing through several rebirths as in the *Visuddhimagga*, which led to the charge of distorting Buddhism to be Brahmanism.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, despite these controversies, the Tipitaka suttas and commentaries used in the orthodox Theravada tradition are mostly from the writings by Buddhaghosa, the major editor of the Tipitaka in the 5th century. King Lithai also used the *Visuddhimagga* as one of his references in composing the Three Worlds, probably because he considered that the notion of mind as unified self is suitable for disseminating the Dhamma to people with theistic background.

The Buddhist scholars who follow the modern perspective classify the suttas into early suttas which represent the early teaching before the various subsects of Buddhism came into being and the latter suttas such as those composed during the 1st – 4th centuries which could have been influenced by local traditions and other socio-cultural factors during the process of Buddhism’s dissemination throughout Asia.¹⁵ It is likely the case that the authentic teachings had been altered to some extent in order to fit in or survive with new cultural environments. With this reason, it is not surprising why some Buddhist scholars such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu are sceptical about some Tipitaka suttas, especially those that are dense with supernatural ideas like some suttas of Ceylonese tradition that were edited by Buddhaghosa and which have become prevalent in Southeast Asia. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu once stated that “about 30-60% of the Tipitaka suttas should be discarded due to the discrepancy in their Dhamma contents.”¹⁶

In my opinion, the problems concerning authenticity of Buddhist texts nowadays is more difficult to solve due to the recent discoveries of ancient manuscripts found in Central Asia, Northern India, and Western China. These manuscripts show that the ancient Buddhist texts were not written only in Pali, they were also written in other languages such as Sanskrit, Chinese, and Gandhari or Prakrit. For example, “the Gandharan scrolls found in Afghanistan and Pakistan dated back to the 1st – 2nd centuries.”¹⁷ These Gandharan scrolls are as old as the suttas of the Pali

canon or even older. And in this aspect, the Pali suttas which have long been accepted as legitimate source of Theravada doctrine in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia can be challenged by the antiquity of the Gandharam scrolls. At the time of Lord Buddha, it might be the case that during in his forty years of teaching the Dhamma, Lord Buddha had taught many groups of people orally in different places and times. The modern approach of seeking for ‘authentic’ teachings of Lord Buddha based upon its timeline, and the idea that “the older the date of manuscript is, the more original the content of the manuscript, since it is less developed or marred by corruptions caused by transcribal errors.”¹⁸ can be problematic since in some contexts the difference in time does not imply the authenticity of the texts.

In response to the modern critics who diminish the supernatural ideas in the Three Worlds as not representing the authentic teaching of Buddhism, I think it is important to reconsider the word ‘authentic’. Any search for an ‘authentic’ teaching should involve looking for commonalities among Buddhist texts to see whether or not they have common concepts in their teachings. In other words, finding the ‘Theravada memes’ among various Buddhist doctrines. The concept of ‘impermanence’ can be considered a Theravada meme which represents the authenticity of Buddhist teachings. Since this concept stands as a main principle of Theravada in Ceylonese tradition, namely in the principle of The Three Marks of Existence. It is also taught in Mahayana doctrine in the teaching about voidness (*sunyata*) and illusion (*maya*), and in Vajrayana doctrine in the teaching about transient nature. In this regard, the concept of impermanence is a dominant concept which can be used as an indication of whether or not a text in question is in line with authentic Buddhist doctrine.

While I personally appreciate Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s attempts to maintain the authentic teachings while making Buddhism contemporary with the changing world, especially his emphasis on attaining the Nibbana ‘here and now’ which encourages the modern Buddhists to see the value of Buddhism in providing spiritual bliss in their present lifetime, there are

some problems with his *Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham* theory. To solve those problems, I would like to apply the approach of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher to interpret the Three Worlds because according to his hermeneutical theory, Schleiermacher suggests that the interpreter should consider the wider linguistic context of meaning [rather than focusing on the word-level meaning that are restricted to only two senses] and the existential context of author altogether, otherwise the interpretation cannot fully reflect the holistic meaning of text as intended by author which is its ideal meaning.

It is not necessary for a Buddhist term to have only two senses of meaning. This only has the effect of condemning the collective understanding of people in each period of history who inevitably assign the meaning based on their uses. It would be unfair to judge that their interpretations of the text such as their interpretation according to the *Phasa Khon* as the interpretation of the fools. On the other hand, the interpretation according to the *Phasa Tham*, as claimed to be derived from the true understanding of the Dhamma, can also be questionable i.e., in terms of legitimacy when one claims that one's interpretation is justified whereas the interpretations by others are not, what are one's evidence to justify such claim. This does not mean that I condemn interpretations in the sense of the *Phasa Tham*. I would rather like to assert that both the *Phasa Khon* which represents the traditional understanding or premodern interpretation and the *Phasa Tham* which represents the demythologized or modern interpretation are neither right nor wrong since the reading of religious text is essentially subjective activity in which faith is heavily involved.

In general hermeneutics, we cannot deny the role of reader as the subject who assigns meaning to the text in the process of reading, as David E. Klemm put it "Although historical prejudices and linguistic horizons are finite, they are open to the infinity of meaning. Language is not the prison house of understanding, but the universal performance of the dialogical openness of the self to the others."¹⁹

To compromise the conflicting views between the traditional understanding which has been criticized as too superstitious and not in line with the authentic teaching and the modern interpretation which can be criticized as lacking sociocultural dimension, two notions from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory are applied in this study namely:

- 1) The notion of hermeneutical circle
- 2) The notion of historical and psychological context of author

These two notions are applied to reread the Three Worlds and to fill the gap in the previous interpretation according to the modern perspective of the *Phasa Khon – Phasa Tham* theory. Although Schleiermacher's theory is considered as a kind of modern interpretation, his hermeneutical method can avoid the problem which might occur with the *Phasa Khon – Phasa Tham* framework since it aims at the holistic meaning of the text by considering the context of meaning beyond the word-level so as to attain the ideal meaning intended by author rather than relying on general grammatical meaning.

The interpretation based on the notion of hermeneutical circle

This method of interpretation can be applied to represent the Three Worlds as not deviating from the orthodox doctrine as expound in the Tipitaka which is its metanarrative. According to Schleiermacher the notion of 'hermeneutical circle' refers to the method of interpretation to understand the holistic meaning in relation to its parts. As he explained:

Just as those texts in which the whole is evident from the parts or in which, given even the faintest outlines of the whole, the parts can be surmised offer the most simple task for determining the relationship between the whole and the parts, so the most difficult ones are those great works of the creative spirit, whatever their form and genre, each of which in its own way is organized in infinite detail and at the same time is inexhaustible in each of its part. Every

solution to the task of understanding appears to us as only an approximation. Our understanding would be complete only if we could proceed with such works as we do with those we have designated as minimal in this respect, that is, if we could solve the problems of the organization of the whole and the parts at least in a relatively similar way... Just as a word relates to a sentence, a sentence to a section, and a section to a work as a particular to a totality or a part to a whole, so, too, every speech and every text is a particular or part that can be completely understood only in relation to a still larger whole.²⁰

The text of the Three Words is compiled from various Tipitaka suttas and commentaries to form a new narrative intended by King Lithai. The method of hermeneutical circle can help one to check whether the holistic meaning of the Three Worlds is still in line with the orthodox doctrine by linking it with the content of the Tipitaka suttas which is its metanarrative in the first place. In this way modern readers can still appreciate the traditional understanding of the Three Worlds as still in line with the orthodox doctrine in the level of core concepts such as impermanence.

The method of hermeneutical circle by using the dominant concept such as impermanence can be helpful in this matter because it can link between the Three Worlds and the Tipitaka in the deeper level of core philosophical concept and theoretically can correspond with the modern notion of attaining the Nibbana ‘here and now.’ As Schleiermacher remarked:

Whenever the understanding of a series of sentences and their interconnection is in question, one must first and foremost know the whole to which they belong. Indeed, since this case, too, can be traced back to the original principle, the principle must hold universally. In fact, every highly coherent set of sentences is governed by a dominant concept, though the way this concept “governs” the text

will vary according to the type of work. This concept, just as a word in a given sentence, can be fully determined only when it is read in its context. That is, any set of sentences, large or small, can be understood correctly only in terms of the whole to which it belongs. And just as the shorter sets of sentences are conditioned by larger sets, so, too, these larger sets are conditioned by still larger ones. Thus, the obvious conclusion is that any part can be completely understood only through the whole.

When we consider the task of interpretation with this principle in mind, we have to say that our increasing understanding of each sentence and of each section, an understanding which we achieved by starting at the beginning and moving forward slowly, is always provisional. It becomes more complete as we are able to see each larger section as a coherent unity. But as soon as we turn to a new part, we encounter new uncertainties and begin again, as it were, in the dim morning light. It is like starting all over, except that as we push ahead the new material illumines everything we have already treated, until suddenly at the end every part is clean and the whole work is visible in sharp and definite contours.²¹

When one reads the *Three Worlds*, one can read each chapter in relation to the dominant concept of impermanence. In this way, one can see that the *Three Worlds* expounds different kinds of changes which occur in the cosmos, in any possible worlds whether the world of phenomena where human beings and animals live in or other supernatural/imaginary realms such as hells and heavens of supernatural beings. The theme of this narrative is to present the presupposition that the intrinsic natures of all beings are under the law of impermanence.

Rereading the *Three Worlds* in this way can link its teaching message as corresponding to the Tipitaka and in so doing it can show that the *Three Worlds* is still in line with the orthodox teaching regardless of

containing a lot of superstitious ideas. This modern perspective of the *Phasa Khon Phasa Tham* prefers only the meanings that are empirically verifiable because it relies on a theory of language which emphasizes the reference of each individual word and assumes that the meaning can be understood in isolation. But in rereading the text through the hermeneutic circle, one can see that the text with its imagery of heavens and hells and the beings which populate them does not focus on any particular ‘being,’ but on its ‘becoming’ in the cosmos.

This aspect of holistic meaning as process of change is gained from understanding the relationship among words’ references in the contexts of objective realms or subjective mental states that they are interchangeable i.e., an identity of certain being is not fixed. It can be transformed physically in the premodern interpretation in different realms as animal, demon, human, or god; or be transformed subjectively in the modern interpretation where one’s physical body or appearance is human but one’s inner identity or mental state is changing between animal, demon, or god. However, the reason behind all these changes whether in the sense of objectivity or subjectivity is to show the impermanence of being (*Anicca*), the suffering as caused by the change (*Dukkha*), and the truth of non-self (*Anatta*) which is in line with the principle of Three Marks of Existence (*Tilakkhana*). The Three Worlds might be composed with this purpose i.e., to communicate this Theravada message to people at that time who were influenced by theistic beliefs and the belief in the permanent beings. Nevertheless, although the Three Worlds concept seems to refuse the existence of permanent beings, it does not refuse the existence of permanence. In its cosmological system, the permanence is presented as the Nibbana which exists beyond the boundary of the Three Worlds which are the impermanent worlds of beings. In this world, the readers whose spiritual orientation were directed toward permanence, eternity, immortality can derive such implication from the Three Worlds as well.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu idea of Nibbana ‘here and now’ is known as the *Pañña Vimutti* ²² which is a kind of spiritual liberation by means of wisdom for realizing the truth of nature such as impermanence. This kind

of enlightenment can be seen, for example, in the Bahiya Sutta in which Lord Buddha taught a man named Bahiya to contemplate the impermanent nature of the world. After Bahiya had practiced this according to Lord Buddha's guidance, he could reach enlightenment more quickly.

Then Venerable Bahiya went up to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and said to him: "Sir, may the Buddha please teach me Dhamma in brief. When I've heard it, I'll live alone, withdrawn, diligent, keen, and resolute."

"What do you think, Bahiya? Is the eye permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, sir."

"But if it's impermanent, is it suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, sir."

"But if it's impermanent, suffering, and liable to fall apart, is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?"

"No, sir."

"Are sights ... eye consciousness ... eye contact ... the pleasant, painful, or neutral feeling that arises conditioned by mind contact: is that permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, sir."

"But if it's impermanent, is it suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, sir."

"But if it's impermanent, suffering, and liable to fall apart, is it fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self'?"

"No, sir."

Seeing this, a learned noble disciple grows disillusioned with the eye, sights, eye consciousness, and eye contact. And they grow disillusioned with the painful, pleasant, or neutral feeling that arises conditioned by eye contact. They grow disillusioned with the ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, painful, pleasant, or neutral feeling that arises conditioned by mind contact.

Being disillusioned, desire fades away. When desire fades away, they're freed. When they're freed, they know they're freed. They understand: 'rebirth is ended, the spiritual journey has been completed, what had to be done has been done, there is no return to any state of existence.'²³

This sutta represents the possibility of sudden enlightenment in contrast to the notion of being enlightened by merits accumulated from good deeds. The contemplation on impermanence can be one of the means of attaining the spiritual bliss in the present lifetime by training one's consciousness to interpret the phenomena within that.

In fact, King Lithai also explained this practice in the Three Worlds in terms of sequential meditation practices,

The yogin who, through such progress, cuts off the life continuum then reaches the maturity of insight; and the supraworldly absorption consciousness then arises. At that time there are two or three flashes of insight-consciousness that will obstruct any object of consciousness; the characteristic of impermanence, for example, will arise with the power of the preliminary stage, the access stage, and the stage of conformity... The insight that leads to rising into the supraworldly sphere that discerns the absence of ego or person gives rise to the path that is called the void liberation path. The insight that leads to rising into the supraworldly sphere that discerns impermanence give rise to the path that is called the signless liberation path.²⁴

However, he had reflected that such meditation practices require great effort and intellectual capacity, so not everyone can succeed in this path, and so proposed the path of faith in the future Buddha and making merits as an alternative practice for spiritual liberation.

Whoever wishes to reach the celestial treasure, which is the deliverance of Nibbana, let him listen to this Sermon on the Three Worlds with care and interest, with faith in

his heart, and without being heedless in any way. He will then be able to meet the Lord Sri Ariya when he is born in the future, to pay his respect to him, and to listen to the Dhamma that he will preach²⁵

If one reads the Three Worlds hermeneutically according to the concept of impermanence, one can see that it can correspond with the modern perspective and the attainment of Nibbana, 'here and now' which is evidenced by the Bahiya Sutta. However, based on Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's approach of empty mind, one must contemplate on the present moment, in other words, the 'here and now' instant occurred in the mind to be aware of the arising defilements. In contrast to his approach, the contemplation on impermanence in the Three Worlds, one must contemplate on the changing nature of phenomena which presupposes the consciousness of time from past, present, and future altogether to realize the state of change. An example would be the temporal aspect of listening to a song and gradually making an aesthetic judgment that the song is beautiful. Such judgment is not made based on each instant of hearing the melody but rather from the totality of the hearing experience in one's consciousness. This applies to the process of becoming aware of the world as impermanent. This judgement is possible by the consciousness of time not in the basis of instantaneous moment but in the totality of time from past, present, future as projected in the mind. Reading the Three Worlds and its imagery of heavens and hells and afterlives, one gains an awareness of the impermanence of one's present life much in the same way as in the modern psychological perspective which considers such imagery as superstition.

The mind that is not touched by the vicissitudes of life, the mind that is free from sorrow, is stainless and secure. This is the highest blessing. Those who have fulfilled the conditions for such blessings are victorious everywhere and attain happiness everywhere. To them these are the highest blessings.²⁶

Based on this notion from the Mangala Sutta, by contemplating the impermanent nature in every aspect of life experience, one can be aware that there is nothing in the world that one can hold on to including one's own self as having fixed identity. In such a way, one starts to let go one's attachments with the world of impermanence and thus entering the state of Nibbana. This approach of attaining the Nibbana is heavily involved with the cognitive process in one's interpretation of the phenomena experienced in one's life. The psychological outcome of this practice can contribute to one's becoming someone who recognizes the impermanence of life and yet is skillful in one's life.

The interpretation based on the notion of historical and psychological context of author

This interpretation is an attempt to understand the text through the understanding of author by considering his or her historical and psychological context. This method can expose the sociocultural dimension of the Three Worlds. It is not limited to the spiritual aspect of the Three Worlds as an instruction on the attainment of Nibbana. Schleiermacher's method of interpretation based on historical and psychological context of author can show that the Three Worlds might be composed for sociocultural reasons too.

Readers with a more postmodern view of 'the death of the author' often disagree with this method because it gives too much importance to the role of the author or the reader as an autonomous subject who has control over the text itself. However, in my opinion, it is difficult to ignore the agenda of its author. Although it is difficult to understand the intentions of an author who passed away long time ago, it is important to bring a historical context of a text into consideration. As Schleiermacher pointed out that "no determination of meaning is correct unless it is supported by an examination of the spirit of the author and the spirit of classical antiquity,"²⁷ and in this sense he emphasized the benefit of combining both aspects of grammatical interpretation and psychological interpretation:

“If our first reading of a text does not immediately give us a certain and complete understanding, then we must employ both methods in both aspects – though naturally in varying degrees according to the difference of their objects – until the result approximates as nearly as possible that of immediate understanding. We surely must accept what I have said about one class of interpreters inclining more to the psychological and another to the grammatical aspect. We know that many a virtuoso in grammatical interpretation give scant attention to the internal process of combining thoughts in one’s mind and feeling. And, vice versa, there are fine interpreters who reflect about the special relationship of a text to its language only minimally and then only in those rare cases when they are forced to consult a dictionary. If we take this into account and apply it equally to the two methods, we must conclude that just as we can regard immediate and instantaneous understanding as having arisen in either way, thus directing our attention to the author’s creativity or to the objective totality of the language, so we can regard the successful completion of a more artful method in interpretation in these same terms. We can now say that all the points of comparison, for the psychological as well as for the grammatical aspects, have been brought together so perfectly that we no longer need to consider the divinatory method and its results.”²⁸

With this view, the understanding of text can be more complete if one can interpret a text by considering both the grammatical aspect of meaning and the historical context of author as shaped by historical and psychological conditions because in the latter, language can be seen as a tool used by author to express his mode of existence. This type of interpretation goes beyond the word-level meanings whether literal or metaphorical.

The historical context of King Lithai

The Three Worlds concept creates the image of King Lithai as a devout Buddhist ruler. His intention of composing the Three Worlds as stated in the text is to teach the Dhamma to his royal mother and his subjects. However, if one considers the historical context of ancient Sukhothai society, the reasons behind his composition are more than those stated in the text. For example, in terms of Sukhothai's economy at that time, the stone inscriptions and artifacts reflect that Sukhothai was a thriving trading city where merchants from various civilizations came to trade. The Sukhothai artifacts reflect the practices of different beliefs-systems. This could be a reason why although Theravada Buddhism gained importance in the society as supported by the monarch, but it was not imposed on people by force. Being a cosmopolitan society required a free trade policy and freedom of beliefs to guarantee the well-being of people from various cultures living in the city. These aspects of Sukhothai's thriving economy and cultural diversity correspond with the archaeological artifacts found at present time.²⁹

In terms of the religious beliefs, prior to the restoration of Theravada doctrine during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, there were already three prevalent beliefs practiced in Sukhothai society, namely 1) animism which has been reflected in various folk cults since prehistoric time, 2) Hinduism which was influenced by both Indian and Khmer cultures, 3) Mahayana Buddhism which was influenced by the Khmer culture during the reign of King Jayavarman VII who converted to Mahayana faith and at that time Sukhothai was one of his vassal states.

Viewing Sukhothai as a multicultural society through this historical evidence, it is likely the case that King Lithai was aware that his subjects were people of different faiths. To rule them effectively and to promote social harmony, syncretism would be a good mean to do so. In my opinion, his composition of the Three Worlds might also represent his political agenda since it is noticeable that the text as presenting his interpretation of Buddhist cosmology is selectively made to be compatible with theistic beliefs. In contrast to Frank E. Reynolds's view that "the

Trai Phum is a royal text, an expression of the orthodox Theravada tradition and a sermon that seeks to make the Dhamma more accessible to the laity.”³⁰, I am rather skeptical about whether the Three Worlds view really represents the ‘orthodox’ doctrine and the concept of ‘orthodoxy’ itself is also suspect. However, it seems to be the case that King Lithai consciously selected the Tipitaka suttas and commentaries to create the syncretic cosmological narrative. The Three Worlds in a way is his own interpretation of the Tipitaka of which he designed to fit with the nature of his society. Most suttas that King Lithai used in his composition are from the suttas and commentaries edited by Buddhaghosa that are known in general as containing supernatural elements.

It might be the case that the Three Worlds concept reflects his political agenda. Namely his kingdom had been under the influences of Hindu and Mahayana beliefs for centuries, so to avoid the religious conflict in advocating Buddhism, he had chosen to promote Theravada doctrine in a way that it can harmonize with the other beliefs. The evidence to support this view is the stone inscription of Kamphaengphet, the major vassal state of Sukhothai. This inscription was found at the base of the statue of Lord Shiva in the ancient city shrine, and the message clearly represents the attitude of Sukhothai ruler toward other religions as stated that “the king’s purpose to enshrine this Hindu god was to protect the peoples and animals in the city and to elevate the three beliefs including Buddhism, animism, and theism together.” This inscription and other statues of Hindu deities cast during the reign of King Lithai can be the proof to assume that the Three Worlds idea is not meant for one religion, but it can be a kind of syncretic Theravada cosmology as interpreted by King Lithai to teach his citizen as a whole.

คำจารึก	คำปริวรรต
<p>๑. ศักราช ๑๔๓๒ มะเมียนกัษัตร์^(๑) อาทิตยพาร^(๒) เดือนหก ขึ้นสิบสี่ค่ำได้หัดฤ^(๓) // กษเพลรุงแล้ว สองนาฬิกาจึงเจ้าพรญาศรีธรรมมาโคกราช ประดิสถาน^(๔) พระอัสว^(๕)//เป็นเจ้านี่ไวให้ครองสัตว์^(๖) สี่ตีนสองตีนในเมืองกำแพงเพชร^(๗) แลช่วยเลอก // สาขณาพุทธ^(๘) สาขนแลไสยสาขนแลพระเทพกรรม มิโทมนโทมองให้^(๙)</p>	<p>๑. ศักราช ๑๔๓๒^(๑) (ปี)มะเมียนกัษัตร์ อาทิตยพาร เดือน ๖ ขึ้น ๑๔ ค่ำ^(๒) ได้หัดฤกษ์^(๓) เพลรุงแล้ว ๒ นาฬิกา จึงเจ้าพระยาศรีธรรมมาโคกราช ประดิษฐาน พระอัสว^(๔)เป็นเจ้านี่ไวให้ครองสัตว์สี่ตีน สองตีนในเมืองกำแพงเพชรแลช่วยเล็ก^(๕) ศาสนา พุทธศาสตร์และไสยศาสตร์และพระเทพกรรมให้ หมั่นให้หมองให้</p>

Figure 1, the deciphered message of the stone inscription no. 13 of Kamphaengphet, reflecting the syncretic motif of Sukhothai ruler ³¹



Figure 2, Hindu gods statues, some were cast in the reign of King Lithai, at Bangkok National Museum³²

The Three Worlds as promoting syncretic beliefs

Theravada concepts such as the concepts of Nibbana and the concept of mind, when used in the Three Worlds, were made more compatible with theistic beliefs. This might reflect King Lithai's psychological context, namely his intention to establish harmony among the religions by making

his cosmology to correspond with theistic beliefs. For instance, the concept of Nibbana in which there are about 66 occurrences in the text can be classified as having different four senses of meaning:

i) the Nibbana as celestial space or heavenly city e.g., “Thus, we have given our brief account of the city of Nibbana which is more superb than the three worlds and the limitless cakavala.”³³

ii) Nibbana as ultimate treasure, worthy of possession e.g., “The treasure of Nibbana brings a very high degree of pleasure, happiness, and tranquility; nothing can be found to equal it.”³⁴

iii) Nibbana as extinction e.g., “When our Lord Buddha attained Nibbana, there were three kinds. One is called the Nibbana of defilements, one is called the Nibbana of the aggregates, and another is called the Nibbana of the relics.”³⁵

iv) Nibbana as state of mind occurred in the advanced meditation practice e.g., “The change of lineage then arises for one moment, and Nibbana is taken as the object of consciousness; there the lineage of an ordinary person is eliminated.”³⁶

Among these four senses of meaning, the first and the second meanings are mostly used throughout the text, whereas the uses of the third and the fourth senses are found only in chapter eleven. The third sense is the Pali literal meaning and it corresponds to the orthodox doctrine most, but it occurs in the Three Worlds only in the context relating to the historical Buddha, in other contexts such as cosmological and moral teachings. The first and the second senses are mostly used by the author.

As for the concept of mind which is also controversial in Theravada philosophy, there are about 70 occurrences of the Pali term “*Citta*” (mind) found in the text and most of them are used in relation to the transformation of life, namely the mind as agent of rebirth such as “This kind of rebirth linkage occurs as follows: a mind that takes the rebirth linkage sees and knows with wisdom without being told by anyone, experiences gladness, and takes the rebirth linkage”³⁷ and the mind as being uplifted to attain the Nibbana such as “As for the mind of the yogin, it is cut off because of the power of two flashes of consciousness called the full cognition

absorption. It does not proceed into the future at all. At that time, the yogin reaches the attainment of cessation”³⁸

According to a classification in the Tipitaka, “the *Citta* (*mind*), the *Rupa* (*form*), the *Nibbana* are not the *Cetasika* (*mental concomitants or mental factor*).”³⁹ This implies that the mind, the form, and the Nibbana are the beings as subjects in themselves in contrast to the *Cetasika* which are the objects of thought to be experienced by the *Citta* (the mind as subject who does the act of experiencing). In the Three Worlds, the terms ‘*Citta*’ and ‘*Nibbana*’ are also used by the author in the same sense of ‘*Non-Cetasika*,’ thus the concept of *Nibbana* in the Three Worlds is presented as having an ontological existence in itself such as the *Nibbana* as celestial city where the *Citta* can take refuge in.

However, there is another classification in the Tipitaka, namely the classification based on the nature of conditioned beings, “*Sankhata Laksana*.”⁴⁰ In this classification the *Citta* is not in the same group with *Nibbana* because the mind is a kind of conditioned being and it is doomed to be impermanent, unlike the Nibbana, which is not a conditioned being and therefore is eternal. According to this sutta, the mind has transient nature characterized by the factors of arising, vanishing, and changing, in contrast to the *Nibbana* which is the only unconditioned being in the cosmos known as the “*Asankhata Dathu*.”⁴¹ Based on this notion, when the mind is attaining the Nibbana, the two beings, namely the mind and the Nibbana should be of same nature which implies that the mind cannot remain itself as a conditioned being; it should be either losing its conditioned nature or transforming into the same nature with the *Nibbana*. This aspect of the mind corresponds with the third and the fourth senses of meaning of the *Nibbana*, and it is also in line with the *Phasa Tham*’s concept of *Nibbana* as an empty mind without ego.

However, this notion is not encouraged by the author as one can notice from the numbers of its occurrence in the text. On the contrary, the *Citta* as subject which does not lose its subjecthood when attaining the *Nibbana* is more obvious in the Three Worlds, and it is the notion compatible with Mahayana and other theistic beliefs in the sense that the

immortality of subject is still preserved while attaining the spiritual ideal.

The Three Worlds as justifying King Lithai's right to rule

King Lithai composed the Three Worlds during the time when he was still the viceroy. "Phya Lithai reigned in Srisachanalai for six years, and then he composed this Sermon on the Three Worlds."⁴² Considering his political condition, it might be the case that the Three Worlds can serve as an appraisal to his knowledge of Buddhism and thus being worthy of the title 'Dhamma Raja' i.e., being the king who rules by Dhamma and gains victory by means of Dhamma like King Ashoka the great in the history. King Ashoka had become an idol of Siamese rulers since the Sukhothai period as reflected in the Three Worlds. The tradition of using royal title related to the Dhamma like '*Phra Maha Thammaracha*' emerged in the reign of King Lithai which represents this Indian influence in Thai politics as different from the Hindu concept of god-king (*Devaraja*). The deed that King Lithai composed the Three Worlds to teach his mother as described in the text not only demonstrated him as a good son, but also made him resemble Lord Buddha who gave his sermon to his mother in heaven.

The notion of Cakkavatit king (king of universe) who expands his power by making great merit in all human realms as described in the text can be considered as being simulated by King Lithai's deeds in disseminating Buddhism all over his kingdom as evidenced by several Buddhist monuments created during his reign. Moreover, the notion of the Bodhisattva king as described in the text also suggests a new concept of ruler unlike before.

After they meet and speak to one another like this, they go to pay their respect to the Lord Bodhisatta, asking him to be their lord and their leaders and to have them as his servants. They then consecrated the Lord Bodhisatta to be their king by endowing him with three names; one name is Great Elect, another name is Khattiya, and another name is King. The reason that he is called Great Elect is because it is the people who appoint him to be their superior. The

reason that he is called Khattiya is because the people agree to have him divide the highland fields, the lowland fields, the rice, and the water among them. The reason that he is called King is because he pleases the sense and the minds of the people – thus he is called King for that reason.⁴³

Unlike the notion of Cakkavatit king which represents the king's expansion of power by means of merit and magical power, the new notion of Theravada king as proposed in the latter part of the text represents a more modern notion of king i.e., one deserves to be king by three reasons 1) being appointed by the people, 2) being able to handle economic affairs, 3) being able to please the people with his appearance and virtues. King Lithai had promoted this awareness of Thai rulers to the people through his writing of the Three Worlds partly to justify the monarch's right to the throne and partly to link Theravada virtues with politics to gain acceptance from the people.

The Three Worlds as political tool to organize Thai society

The Three Worlds concept was also a political tool to establish and regulate Thai society based on Theravada system which was different from the previous Khmer-Hindu beliefs. One aspect of this reform can be seen from the beliefs about human nature and the role of the ruler. The emergence of Buddhism in the course of Indian history can be seen as a reaction against the dominant Brahmin beliefs and its oppressive caste system and the authority over spiritual salvation. Likewise, the genesis myth as described in the Three Worlds holds that human beings are equal in terms of their original divine nature. The ruler can claim their right to rule only by his quality of Dhamma. Here, social hierarchy is still preserved but it is organized based on the belief of meritocracy. According to the Three Worlds, ancestors of mankind are celestial beings who descended to live on earth. They were primarily from divine backgrounds but living in the earthy conditions gradually changed their nature and caused them to engage in bad deeds.

Once they have eaten this rice, worldly behavior involving

the pleasure of passion coexists with behavior in accordance with Dhamma – and the people come to include both men and women...After groups of women and men have emerged like that, they are attracted to one another; and thus sexual relations among people according to the natural way of the world has existed from the kappa long, long ago. From then on they find shelters and living places in order to moderate the shame that is associated with their evil doing...Together we should appoint one person to be our superior, to be our lord, and to be our leader; whenever we are wrong or right in any way, let him judge and enforce the affairs, determining what is wrong and what is right for us⁴⁴

The aspect of social hierarchy as reflected in the Three Worlds is set by the beliefs in merit and sin which have political implication in determining the social status of people i.e., people who do bad deeds or have less merit are believed be lower position or inferior to those who have more merits. In this way, the Theravada social hierarchy is administrated with belief in the degree of merit or meritocracy.

The Three Worlds in this aspect can reflect King Lithai's goal of reforming the Thai social administration through a cosmological system. He did not impose the belief on his citizens that he is a god-king (Devaraja) who came to help people who cannot help themselves. Instead he justified the authority of king by means of meritocracy such as in the story of the Cakkavatit king and encouraged his subjects to help the society altogether by making merit to better their condition in this cosmos.

Although social hierarchy still exists in Theravada cosmology it is not so fixed and static like that of the Hindu caste system. In Theravada meritocracy, one's social status is determined by one's level of merits. With this belief, people's behaviors and social activities are driven very much by the belief of merit accumulation which can affect their well-being and social status in the world. This belief has long been influential in Thai culture. Traditionally Thais have the impulse to make merit to better themselves in the afterlife. The benefit of this belief is that it can motivate

people to do good for their life and for the society which indirectly reduces the works of ruler. One can see this in many Thai cultural activities which are usually concerned with merit making and charitable events.

Meritocracy can function effectively with the beliefs in the afterlife and having fixed self-identity existing through time which King Lithai depicted in the Three Worlds. In Theravada social hierarchy, it is necessary to presuppose the belief in afterlife. For example, if there are many candidates for kingship and all of them have done good deeds equally, who should have the right to rule? To deal with this problem, the Three Worlds must assert the notions of former life and afterlife to make room for the belief in merits accumulated before the present lifetime to justify one's claim to authority. However, the merit accumulated in the former lifetime is a matter of faith such as in the Jataka tales which basically convey the messages about the great merit that Lord Buddha had made in his previous lives to demonstrate why he is an exceptional being worthy of praise and respect. This belief in merit accumulated in former lives and after lives has had political implications in Thai culture since the time of Sukhothai. It functions to sustain the social structure and it is not surprising why King Lithai had proposed it in his cosmology. To support this point, one can compare the Three Worlds of King Lithai to another cosmological text written by his teacher, Phra Medhankara. The background of Phra Medhankara is probably of Mon or Burmese origin. He went to study Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and when he returned from his study, King Lithai invited him to be the supreme patriarch at Sukhothai.⁴⁵ It is noticeable that the way in which King Lithai classified the Three Worlds is different from the way in which Phra Medhankara classified in his cosmological text, *the Lokadipakasara*. The content of *the Lokadipakasara* is more concerned about cosmological nature and less hierarchical than the Three Worlds of King Lithai. It has three worlds, namely 1) the sensuous planes (*Kamavacara Bhumi*), 2) the form planes of existence (*Rupavacara Bhumi*), and 3) the formless planes of existence (*Arupavacara Bhumi*). According to the contents of *the Lokadipakasara*, its three worlds are classified as 1) the world of formations (Sankhara

Loka) which is related to mental formation factors, 2) the world of beings (Satta Loka) which is related to living creatures, and 3) the spatial world (Okasa Loka) which is related to physical matters in space.⁴⁶ The concept of three worlds in Phra Medhankara's text reflects more objective ontological aspects of beings, whereas the Three Worlds of King Lithai reflect more moral and hierarchical aspects of beings in terms of their degree of pleasure.

Although some parts of the Three Worlds show that King Lithai was knowledgeable in the Theravada contents according to the modern perspective such as the instantaneous nature of mind and the Nibbana as subjective mental state, in most parts of the text he explained his cosmology by using the concepts that are compatible with popular theistic beliefs such as the concept of Nibbana as heaven, the concept of rebirth in the Samsara in a similar fashion to the Jataka tales and the concept of fixed self-identity which continues to exist in various lifetimes, and the attainment of Nibbana which takes several lifetimes to accomplish by means of merit making.

The interpretation of the Three Worlds in terms of historical and psychological context of the author reflects that the text was written based on the perspective of the ruler whose primary concern would be about how to rule his kingdom properly so that it can last. In this aspect, the interpretation according to the modern perspective of Phasa Khon – Phasa Tham which focuses mainly on attaining the Nibbana might not be the case if the text was not meant for religious purpose. Attaining the Nibbana is a religious ideal but if everyone can do so, it would mean the end of society too. In my opinion, if it is only the matter of teaching religious matters, it would not be necessary for King Lithai to bother composing the Three Worlds, as there are the Tipitaka and other cosmological texts available already. The composition of the Three Worlds must be considered with reference to its political implications. The author's duty as a king should concern about how to maintain the society rather than teaching the citizens to discard society to become monks. As shown in the text, King Lithai reflected on how the orthodox spiritual practices to attain

the Nibbana are so tough that very few succeed. And as an alternative, he encouraged the people to make merit instead which is an easier path and indirectly beneficial to the society.

Those who meditate in the supra-worldly jhana that provides the basis for the attainment of Nibbana; who view intently the wheel of worldly existence; who view Nibbana, which brings it to an end; and who view the past time, the future time, and the present time, which is the time behind, the time ahead, and the time of the here and now, do these things with the aid of the ten meditation practices called kasina. They use these meditation devices with strenuousness and diligence, and obtain the five levels of jhana, the eight attainments, and the six kinds of mental sciences. Even if everything is eliminated, if these accomplishments are not reached, Nibbana cannot be attained. This Nibbana can only be realized by very special people.⁴⁷

We have given a brief account of the Lords who have meditated and attained Nibbana. Those who have wisdom should really and truly contemplate in this way so that they might come to know the superb Nibbana...What kind of beings are able to lead other beings to reach that place? One who has built up an accumulation of perfection and has wished to reach Nibbana every day and every night without cessation at all, even for a moment, and has done this for as long as 100,000 great kappa plus one kappa of immense duration in addition will do so. Still, despite the fact that he has practiced the perfection for that amount of time, he cannot lead other beings to reach Nibbana. He can only take himself alone, to reach Nibbana.⁴⁸

King Lithai gave his followers instead the opportunity to make merit for the spiritual goal of seeing the future Buddha. This is in contrast to the idea of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu which encouraged people to attain the Nibbana 'here and now.'

Whoever wishes to reach the celestial treasure, which is

the deliverance of Nibbana, let him listen to this Sermon on the Three Worlds with care and interest, with faith in his heart, and without being heedless in any way. He will then be able to meet the Lord Sri Ariya when he is born in the future, to pay his respect to him, and to listen to the Dhamma that he will preach.⁴⁹

It is rather obvious that King Lithai did not propose the notion that one should attain Nibbana at the present lifetime like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu did. And like other traditionalist views such as in the Jataka tales and the Phra Malai sutta, he presented the Nibbana as spiritual goal which takes several lifetimes to achieve by means of merit making. As a result, people who believe in the Three Worlds are motivated to make merit continuously, which indirectly benefits the society. The advantages of premodern interpretation or traditional understanding lie in its sociocultural function. I do not think that the traditionalist perspective is a foolish interpretation. On the contrary, it can exist alongside the modern perspective, which is rather individualistic and lacks this sociocultural dimension. With Schleiermacher's hermeneutical method, it can reflect a deeper socio-political implication of the narrative in constructing the beliefs for society and guidance for people. Moreover, the Three Worlds as interpreted in traditional sense has enriched the Thai cultural heritages as can be seen from Thai literature, art, architecture, way of life, and ceremonies. It is hardly possible to think about what Thai culture would be like without the traditional understanding of the Three Worlds.

Conclusion

The Three Worlds According to King Ruang is an influential religious narrative to Thai culture. It was composed based on many Theravada texts as a kind of synthetic composition. Although the general contents of this text seem to be similar to other Theravada writings, each narrative does have its own distinctive features if we bring the historicity of author and subjectivity of readers into consideration. As the nature of meaning is more fluid than fixed; a word's meaning can be changed

from time to time depending on the use of people of that language. In this regard, a single text being read or interpreted at different time by different people can give different understanding.

This study attempts to fill the gap of modern perspective of the *Phasa Khon Phasa Tham* theory. It found out that the problematic aspect of that theory lies in its concept of meaning which focuses on the word-level of grammatical meaning rather than considering the holistic meaning expressed in the wider context of the narrative. According to Schleiermacher, the ideal interpretation is the one that can represent the meaning as intended by author, and to be able to do so, a careful interpreter should not focus only on the grammatical aspect of the text which is atomistic and reflects only the general 'sense' of meaning as one can learn from dictionary. The deeper interpretation should aim to get the original source of meaning or 'reference' from the author's intention. To attain such ideal meaning in the process of interpretation, he suggests the method of bringing historical and psychological aspect into consideration. Another method proposed by him is the method of hermeneutical circle which gives importance to the holistic meaning as generated by the relationship between the parts and the whole of narrative. One can observe that each word in the narrative plays a different role. Some words play the role of being subordinate ideas, while some words play the dominant role as being controlling idea.

In this study, both methods have been applied to reread the Three Worlds and they can help in filling the gaps of previous interpretation, namely the gap in the premodern perspective or traditional understanding which lacks the implication for the Nibbana 'here and now' (in case if the afterlife does not exist) can be solved by the interpretation based on the dominant concept of impermanence which also justifies that the Three Worlds concept is in line with the orthodox doctrine of Buddhism despite the fact that it contains several supernatural beliefs which could be arguably influenced from other theistic beliefs. The gap in modern perspective can be solved by bringing historical and psychological context of the author into consideration. This method can reflect how the Three

Worlds is bound with the history of Thailand. It has crucial sociocultural implications and is not merely existing as text for religious function.

Finally, I would like to address that our ancestors had left many kinds of legacies. The religious scriptures are valuable heritages. The beliefs kept in the books are silent. Only through reading and interpretation can they be brought back to life, to converse with us again. The best preservation of thoughts is not through storing them in paper or digital format, but reviving them in the hearts of people. I believe that the peace in Thailand is heavily influenced by the syncretic religious teachings which have conditioned the mentality of the people since earlier times, thus rendering the country to be the land of unity within diversity. In this digital age, we live within the rapid influx of changes. New technologies and ideas are constantly replacing old ones. It would be tragic to lose older forms of knowledge like religion which teaches us how to live one's life, how to live with others, and how to deal with change. Religion and ethics are arguably the knowledge which matters most to mankind in the long run. To promote the study of religion and philosophy is by turning to hermeneutics to learn how to read, to criticize, to understand them with one's open mind. As Klemm remarked:

Hermeneutics has the task of allowing the meaning in texts and existence to speak again. Sacred scriptures, classic literature, and legal codes are texts that carry an intent to speak into a human situation. Because human situations change in unforeseeable ways, these texts call for hermeneutics to assist them in speaking again. The meanings that demand our understanding may be ritual gestures or significant actions within the social world. Here as well, hidden, and disputed meanings must be brought to light. Hermeneutics functions as an aid to understanding meanings in texts and existence. Because the text or significant action cannot speak for itself and must be interpreted to speak at all, hermeneutics comes into play.⁵⁰

With open discussion and views from different perspectives, the

silent writings then can actively converse with us again and it seems that they still have something new to tell us each time we ‘carefully’ read them.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the sake of convenience, from now onwards I use the shortened title as ‘The Three Worlds.’

² Nidhi Eoseewong, “ธรรมยุตของธรรมยุต,” (Dhammayuttika Nikaya), accessed March 29, 2022, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2016/10/68495>

³ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham (Nontaburi: Buddhist Dissemination Center, 1966), 6.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ See examples of his sermons about Dhamma and science from: <https://youtu.be/y1F-RyVK9zs> and <https://youtu.be/7OiC610n4M>

⁶ Buddhadasa, “Phasa Khon - Phasa Tham,” 9-32.

⁷ See example of Buddhadasa’s sermons about ‘Nibbana here and now’ from: https://youtu.be/MTPyqn6_UQM and <https://youtu.be/RYKuFZ2Ze30> .

⁸ Sathianphong Wannapok, From Sathianphong Wannapok to Phra Thepwethi (P. A. Payutto) and Buddhadasa (Bangkok: Chormafai Press, 1989), 34-35.

⁹ Ibid, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid, 35.

¹¹ Ibid, 36-37.

¹² Ibid, 43-44.

¹³ Ibid, 69.

¹⁴ Ibid, 69.

¹⁵ “Early Buddhist texts,” Wikipedia, last modified January 18, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Buddhist_texts.

¹⁶ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Buddhadasa Likit, volume. 1 (Bangkok: Sukkhaphabchai Press, 1998), 106.

¹⁷ Stefan Baums, “Gandharan Scrolls: Rediscovering an Ancient Manuscript Type” 184, accessed March 26, 2022, https://stefanbaums.com/publications/baums_2014_3.pdf

¹⁸ Enomoto Fumio, “The Discovery of The Oldest Buddhists Manuscripts” 161, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/267922585.pdf>

¹⁹ David E. Klemm, Hermeneutic Inquiry, Volume I: The Interpretation of Texts (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 177.

- ²⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Academy Addresses” in the *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, volume I, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 79-80.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 77.
- ²² Sucheeb Bunyanuphab, *The Tipitaka for Layperson* (Bangkok: Mahamongkut University Press, 1996), 585.
- ²³ “Bahiya Sutta,” [suttacentral.net](https://suttacentral.net/sn35.89/en/sujato), accessed February 13, 2022, <https://suttacentral.net/sn35.89/en/sujato> .
- ²⁴ Phya Lithai, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, trans. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 343-344.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 350.
- ²⁶ “Mangala Sutta,” [suttacentral.net](https://suttacentral.net/kp5/en/piyadassi?reference=none&highlight=false), accessed March 16, 2022, <https://suttacentral.net/kp5/en/piyadassi?reference=none&highlight=false>
- ²⁷ Schleiermacher, “Academic Addresses,” in *Hermeneutic Inquiry, Volume I: The Interpretation of Texts*, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 86.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 73.
- ²⁹ See example of Sukhothai history as city of cultural diversity from: https://youtu.be/tGZfU__762Y
- ³⁰ Phya Lithai, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, trans. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California,
- ³¹ Thai inscription database, “Sukhothai inscription at the base of Phra I-suan of Kampaengphet,” accessed 29/04/202, https://db.sac.or.th/inscriptions/inscribe/image_detail/26013
- ³² Bangkok National Museum. “Sukhothai religious statues.” Accessed 21/04/2022. <https://www.facebook.com/nationalmuseumbangkok/photos/a.165319730186928/5395124507206398>
- ³³ Phya Lithai, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, trans. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 347.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 329.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 330.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 344.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 55.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 345-346.
- ³⁹ Sucheeb Bunyanuphab, *The Tipitaka for Layperson*, 81.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 508.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 672.
- ⁴² Phya Lithai, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 45.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 324-325.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 322-324.
- ⁴⁵ Phra Sangharaja Medhankara, *Lokadipakasara* (Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department of Thailand, 2006), iv.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁷ Phya Lithai, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 334.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 346 – 347.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 350.

⁵⁰ Klemm, *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, 2.

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