

Toward a Buddhist theory of language

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The purpose of this paper is:

1. To point out that there is a Buddhist theory of language;
2. To make explicit the fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language, and to show that they are implicit in the most basic principles of Buddhism as set forth in the first teaching of the Buddha—the Four Noble Truths;
3. To assert that the Buddhist theory of language is better than the theory of language that currently dominates the linguistic universe of discourse—better as a scientific theory on scientific grounds as measured by scientific standards, i.e. as measured by the empirical standard, i.e. it can explain the facts better;
4. To briefly sketch one line of argument that provides an abundance of empirical evidence that proves that the Buddhist theory of language is better;
5. To assert that the Buddhist theory of language is also better than the theory that currently dominates the linguistic discourse on humanitarian grounds, i.e. it explicitly addresses the problem of human suffering, and it helps to explain human suffering, and thus it can help to alleviate human suffering;
6. To urge you, as linguists, as Buddhists, as human beings to try to understand the Buddhist theory of language, and to try to see that it is better, and to try to apply it to the study of language and to the problem of suffering, and to try to develop the Buddhist theory of language further.

1. The fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language

Before I begin to explain how the fundamental premises of the Buddhist theory of language are implicit in the Four Noble Truths, there are two potential sources of misunderstanding I would like to obviate.

The first comes from the point of view of linguistics. I have found that when I begin to talk about the Buddhist theory of language to linguists, they frequently tend to be dismissive because they assume that I am talking about one of the ancient Sanskrit linguistic theories, such as those of Patanjali or Panini. Most linguists take the view that, while these theories may be interesting, perhaps, as historically significant developments, as historical relics, they are shallow and simpleminded as compared to modern linguistic theory. So when I say that I am going to talk about

the Buddhist theory of language, it is as if I were proposing to explain the relevance of the bicycle to modern rocket science. However, the only thing those Sanskrit theories have in common with the Buddhist theory of language is that they come from the same part of the world and that they were formulated in the same, or related, languages, i.e. Sanskrit and/or Pali. So I want to make it clear that I am not talking about those ancient arcane Sanskrit theories of language.

The second source of misunderstanding comes from the point of view of Buddhist scholars. When I talk about the Buddhist theory of language to Buddhist scholars, they frequently think I am talking about, or should be talking about, a theory of language that grows out of the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought, which was already highly developed in the most fundamental Buddhist cannon, preeminently in the Abhidhamma, in terms of the five skandhas—the five “aggregates of thought” (Sanskrit *vijñāna-skandha*, Pali *viññāna-khandha*).

I agree with those Buddhist scholars that a Buddhist theory of language must be consistent with the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought as set forth in the Abhidhamma. But the science of linguistics came into being at the turn of this century as an autonomous science, and it is necessary that it remain autonomous. The science of linguistics was born of the struggle to attain and maintain a point of view that is independent of the conventional point of view, because that point of view is the object of its study. Thus the science of linguistics must constantly struggle against the common tendency to subordinate linguistics to other points of view, particularly the conventional point of view, but also the points of view of other sciences, which are to some extent contaminated by the conventional point of view, which includes that of the science of psychology, but it is also independent of all other sciences, down to and including biology and chemistry and physics.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there has been, alas, widespread violation of this principle in recent years, a consequence of the desperation that has resulted from the theoretical disintegration that has resulted from the failure of the prevailing line of theoretical development, a failure that the Buddhist theory of language is capable, I will argue, of rectifying.

Thus from the purely linguistic point of view, linguistics and psychology are seen as two very different sciences. Obviously, the phenomena the two sciences deal with are closely related, perhaps identical to some extent, but the ways these two sciences approach the phenomena are very different, and the key difference is this: Language has perceptible form whereas thought does not. And linguistics takes the form of language as its primary data. Thus linguists endeavor to describe and gather and organize examples of linguistic form from one language, from various dialects of one language, from various related languages, and from unrelated languages. This collection of linguistic forms is the corpus, the body of data, that

linguistics endeavors to explain. This body of data is the empirical ground of linguistics. And so what linguists do is try to discover generalizations, laws, about the form of language, about the forms of particular languages and about families of languages and about language in general. And to posit and test theories that might be able to explain those laws. So the goal of linguistics is to discover the laws that govern the forms of language.

And so the enterprise of linguistics does not depend in any way on the psychology of thought. Indeed, it is just as reasonable to expect that linguistics will shed light on the psychology of thought as it is to expect that the psychology of thought will shed on linguistics. In short, linguistics does not begin with psychology; it begins with the forms of language.

So what I am talking about here as the Buddhist theory of language is not dependent upon a theory of the psychology of thought. It is a theory of language that is prior to and independent of any theory of psychology, Buddhist or otherwise.

Let me emphasize once again that I am not claiming that thought and language are unrelated. I am claiming that we linguists can and should develop a theory of language from the beginning, from the ground up, and not on the basis of a theory of psychology. I will try to clarify the problem of point of view more fully below in section 2.

I have no doubt that it would be interesting and valuable to try to understand how the Buddhist theory of language and the Buddhist theory of the psychology of thought, as set forth in the *Abhidhamma*, fit together, for surely they must. But that is quite a different matter, and one which is subsequent to the present endeavor, because one must have a theory of language before one can see how it might relate to a theory of psychology.

So what I want to do here is to try to develop the foundations of the Buddhist theory of language from the beginning, from the ground up. And here I am taking as the ground the first and most fundamental teaching of the Buddha, which is the Four Noble Truths. In passing I note that, although there are many different schools of Buddhism, they all agree in regarding the Four Noble Truths as the fundamental ground of Buddhism.

The main point I want to make then is this: There is a Buddhist theory of language and the foundations of the Buddhist theory of language are implicit in the Four Noble Truths. Let me turn now to explain how the basic premises of the Buddhist theory of language follow from the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that the normal human being is plagued by chronic suffering (Pali *dukkha*). And so this is the first premise of the Buddhist theory of language.

The first premise of the Buddhist theory of language:

The normal human being is plagued by chronic suffering.

In as much as this premise is very different in character from the basic premises of the conventional theories of language, it is important to briefly explain how it frames the Buddhist theory of language. First, let me say that I did not just stick this premise here to make it look like this is a Buddhist theory. This premise is integral to the Buddhist theory of language. It does real work: it determines how the Buddhist theory of language frames the field of language and it determines how the Buddhist theory of language approaches language.

First, on the level of logic and concept, this first premise functions to frame and focus the point of view that the Buddhist theory of language takes. In this regard this first premise is like the premises of conventional theories of language. That is, it frames language in terms of logic and concept. However, contrary to the basic premises of conventional theories of language, the first premise of the Buddhist theory of language says that what is first and most fundamental in language is not logic or grammar, not phonology or morphology or syntax, indeed not any aspect of form at all. Further, and also contrary to the premises of conventional theories of language, this premise says that what is first and most fundamental is not reference or semantics, not implication, not connotation or denotation, not metaphor or metonymy, indeed not any species of meaning, at least not in the ordinary sense of meaning. Further, and again contrary to the premises of conventional theories of language, this premise says that what is most fundamental is not the physics of sound (acoustic phonetics), not the physical character of the articulatory apparatus (articulatory phonetics), not the physiology of the nervous system or the brain, indeed not any aspect of physicality at all. This premise says that what is first and foremost in framing the human situation in general, and thus human language in particular, is something quite different, namely, suffering.

Of course we must recognize that suffering may have a physical aspect: If I get hit by a stick, or if I break a leg, I will suffer. But such suffering often, if not always, has another aspect that is not physical. This, at least, is what the Buddha teaches. Grammatically speaking, the point of the Buddha's teaching is that a sentence like "I got hit by a stick" not only has an object ("stick") but a subject ("I"). So, while we may agree with conventional wisdom that it is useful and beneficial to investigate the physical aspects of suffering, the Buddha's teaching

asserts that it is also useful and beneficial to investigate this other aspect of suffering. Which is, grammatically speaking, the subject. It is “I” who suffers.

What is more, there are modes of suffering for which there do not seem to be any physical cause, or any cause whatever, such as so-called “free-floating anxiety,” alienation, phobias, paranoia, etc. It is to this point that the very concept of “psychopathology” speaks: what is commonly called “psychopathology” is suffering that does not appear to have a physical cause.

So, while the focus on suffering might impinge on the physical, indeed, as I will show below, the focus on suffering encompasses the physical, the focus is not limited to the physical aspects of suffering. There is always another aspect to suffering. And it is this other aspect that the first Noble Truth seeks to focus our attention upon. I will clarify what this other aspect is as the discussion unfolds.

Similarly, it is possible that suffering can have a characteristic form, and can be taken as bearing meaning. But then everything that is perceptible has form, and everything can be taken as bearing meaning. Even nothing can be taken as bearing meaning. But this first premise puts the central focus of the Buddhist theory of language not on the form or the meaningfulness that suffering might bear, but on the suffering itself, on the painfulness of suffering.¹ In other words, while the Buddhist theory of language must certainly deal with the form and meaning of language, the focus at the beginning is not on any mediate function suffering might have, not on its representational function, but on the immediate actual concrete experience of suffering. What is first and foremost is the brute fact of suffering and the brute qualities of that suffering and the brute force of that suffering, not suffering as the bearer of meaning, but suffering *qua* suffering.

Thus this first premise grounds the Buddhist theory of language in a dimension of experience deeper than that of mediation, deeper than representation, deeper than logic and concept, namely, the dimension of suffering, which is the dimension of emotional energetics, the dimension of vital force.² This deeper realm

¹I think it is significant and not coincidental that the English word “suffer” means to “bear.” This word was borrowed into English from Latin *sub-ferre* (*sub-* meaning “under” and *ferre* from the Indo-European root *bher-* meaning “bear,” i.e. to give birth). This is significant for one thing because suffering does bear meaning. Jacques Lacan talks about this aspect of language in terms of the “passion of the signifier,” where “passion” is a term of art in Christianity that alludes to the suffering of Christ, the word. It is also significant in relation to the point I discuss below as to the distinction between desire that “gives birth” and desire that does not: Desire that gives birth is the type of desire that causes suffering.

²Parenthetically, I will point out that we can correlate this theory of language with C. S. Peirce’s theory of logic and his theory of signs by virtue of the fact that those two realms of phenomena, the mediate and the immediate, correspond to C. S. Peirce’s categories of Thirdness (mediation, the realm of signs) and Secondness (immediate experience, the realm of brute force).

of phenomena underlying that of logic and concept is the dimension of power and force, a dimension that is totally lacking in the conventional theories of language which currently dominate the linguistic universe of discourse. The conventional theories are lacking this dimension of energetics because they begin by thinking of language as a function of logic and try to limit the theory of language to the realm of logic. In doing so the conventional theories must either ignore the vital energetics of language entirely, because energetics is not a matter of logic, or they must try to graft the energetics of language into the theory later by means of *ad hoc* conceptual devices. Such *ad hoc* devices have not been able to and cannot in principle explain the energetics of language. And, since form follows function, and since the function of language is determined by its energetics, the conventional theories of language not only cannot explain the energetics of language, not only cannot explain the function of language, but they also cannot explain the form of language.

Second, in addition to the work this first premise does in the conceptual framing of the Buddhist theory of language, it also charges the enterprise of linguistics with a new dimension of motivation. All sciences and all theories are motivated by the desire to explain and to make sense of and perhaps to control some aspect of the universe. The same is true of linguistics. But, given the nature of suffering, i.e. that it is not good, and given that we linguists as normal human beings also experience this suffering, the Buddhist theory of language not only has the purpose of explaining the facts of language, like conventional theories of language, but it also has the purpose of alleviating suffering. That is, when we do linguistics in the Buddhist theoretical framework, we are motivated by our own suffering to study language in order to alleviate our own suffering, and, perhaps, that of others.

Thus this first premise, which is the First Noble Truth, charges the Buddhist theory of language and the linguistic enterprise with a vital dimension of empirical substance and motivational force that sets it categorically apart from the conventional types of linguistic theories. But what is more, it also sets the Buddhist theory of language apart from the conventional theories of psychology, and biology, and even physics. To put it the other way around, this first premise implies that there is not only a distinct Buddhist theory of language, but also a distinct Buddhist theory of science in general. There is a Buddhist theory of psychology, of course, as we have mentioned, but there is also a Buddhist theory of biology, and a Buddhist theory of physics. Obviously we cannot develop these implications very far in this paper, but in order to situate the Buddhist theory of language in relation to the modern intellectual universe of discourse, which is preeminently the modern

And, in as much as it will be relevant in a moment, I will fill out the tripartite paradigm by mentioning here that Peirce's first category of phenomena, Firstness, is truth. Thus, in Peirce's phenomenology Firstness is truth, Secondness is brute force, Thirdness is the realm of signs, which of course, includes language.

scientific universe of discourse, I will frame the point of view of the Buddhist theory of science as opposed to that of conventional science in Section 2 “The right point of view.” And then in Section 3 I will explicitly spell out some of the basic differences in the premises that accounts for “The difference between conventional science & Buddhist science.”

Now let us move on to the second Noble Truth. Given the first Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, we are naturally led to inquire into the cause of this suffering, and this is the question that is addressed by the Buddha in the Second Noble Truth. But even before we look at the actual wording of the Buddha’s teaching on this question, we can ascertain the general character of the cause of this suffering, because it is implicit in what we have already discussed.

The fact that the Buddha’s teaching is called the Four Noble *Truths* implies that what is at issue here is not a biological problem, nor a chemical, or physical problem, but a truth problem. That is, a falsity problem. So, having accepted the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, when we come to investigate the cause of this suffering, we are led to look for a truth-functional cause, not for a physical or chemical or biological cause. And so, given the self-evident truth that truth is good, and given that suffering is bad, the framing of this teaching as the Four Noble *Truths* already implies that that the cause of this suffering is the opposite of truth, i.e. falsity. Thus the First Noble Truth implies the general character of the Second Noble Truth, which is this: Human beings suffer from false beliefs. This, then, is the second premise of the Buddhist theory of language.

The second premise of the Buddhist theory of language:

*This chronic suffering is a function of truth =
an inverse function of truth =
a function of falsity*

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that the general thrust of the Second Noble Truth is already implicit in the First Noble Truth, it has commonly been misunderstood. This is so because most people approach the Buddha’s teaching having unconsciously assumed the premises of the prevailing conventional universe of discourse, which in modern times is the conventional scientific universe of discourse. And the premises of the conventional scientific universe of discourse are contrary to the premises of the Buddha’s teaching as outlined above, as I will specify in Section 3 below. Thus because people commonly begin with false premises, they commonly misunderstand the Second Noble Truth. In particular, they take it as asserting that the suffering at issue here is a function of biological or chemical or physical causes, which are manifest in our experience as desire.

The operative passage in the Buddha's teaching is as follows (Indasara 1980:17):

The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, O Bhikkhus, is as follows; the Desire leading to Rebirth...

This has been commonly misunderstood to assert that the cause of suffering is desire pure and simple, desire in general, all types of desire, including the purely biological desire for the necessities of life such as the desire for breath, for water, and for food. And it has also been misunderstood to include the desire for relief from suffering, which is obviously the very force that drives the whole Buddhist enterprise. But the text does not speak of desire in general. The word "desire" is modified, and thus limited in scope, by the phrase "leading to Rebirth..." Thus this teaching implies that there are two types or modes of desire: one type that leads to rebirth and, by implication, one that does not. And it is the type of desire that leads to rebirth that causes the suffering that the Buddha is talking about. So the question of the cause of suffering comes down to this question: How do we distinguish desire that leads to rebirth from desire that does not?

And, since we have already ascertained the general character of the cause of suffering, i.e. falsity, we are already in a position to answer this question in principle. The type of desire that leads to rebirth is desire that is in some sense or other false. It is desire that has been confused with falsity, i.e. desire that has been mixed up with and fused together with falsity. This problematic type of desire has sometimes been likened to poisoned water. It is still fundamentally water, and in some sense it is still pure water, but because of the poison, it can no longer be used to satisfy our thirst. In fact, this poisonous desire adds another and much worse type of suffering to the basic suffering that is associated with the desire for water.

The type of desire that leads to rebirth is desire that is not simply desire: it is either not really desire, or else it is desire for something that is not real. So the type of desire at issue here is a paradoxical mode of desire that can only be described paradoxically as desire for suffering. Thus in one sense it should not really be called desire. And yet in another sense it is at bottom pure innocent desire to which something else has been added. So even though we speak of the desire that causes suffering, what is at issue is the something that is added to desire.³ In sum, what is at issue is false desire, duplicitous desire, perverted desire.

³Jacques Lacan makes this distinction in his theory of psychopathology. He leaves the normal word for "desire" to be used for innocent desire, and uses the word *jouissance*, which is a modification of the word *joie* "joy," to talk about the perverted type of desire that causes the psychopathology, the suffering, that plagues the human species.

I think it is important to make it clear that, although my understanding of the Buddha's teaching as to the cause of this suffering deviates from the most common understanding (which I am saying is actually a misunderstanding), it is not uniquely my own interpretation of the Buddha's teaching, nor is it by any means a new interpretation. There are many respected Buddhists who take the view that there are two modes of desire and that what is fundamentally at issue in sorting them out is truth, or falsity.

First, let me point out that the source of the above quote, a very conservative text of *Theravada Buddhist Principles*, also discusses the problem of the "Misinterpretation of Desire," "misplaced desire," etc., and the corresponding necessity of recognizing that there are two types or modes of desire (Indasara 1980:41-52).

Second, let me cite *Food for the Heart*, a collection of teachings of the well-known and respected Thai monk, the Venerable Phra Ajaan Chah of the Thai forest tradition.⁴ In the teaching entitled "Right Practice-Steady Practice" he says explicitly that the problems that Buddhism addresses are a function of truth, or rather, of not knowing⁵ truth (emphasis added).

*If the mind is well trained all problems come to an end. If there are still problems it's because the mind still doubts, it **doesn't know in accordance with the truth**. That is why there are problems.*

And again later in the same teaching he makes the same point in almost the same words:

*Everything becomes difficult because of our ambitions to have and to achieve. Because of these desires to get and to be, **because we don't know according to the truth**, we have no contentment.*

And in a later teaching, "Samma Samadhit-Detachment within Activity," he makes the same point in quite different words:

⁴See the collection of teachings in the Thai forest tradition at the following address: <http://world.std.com/~metta/lib/thai/index.html>).

⁵Let me explain how "not knowing" relates to desire and the problem of desire. The Buddha teaches that there are three modes of desire—ignorance, hate, and love. They are evolutionarily related in that ignorance is the first mode of desire. Ignorance establishes the frame of reference, the space that is needed for the other two modes of desire to develop. Note that ignorance is not the same as simply not knowing. To ignore means to know, but to pretend to not know. And what it is that the basic mode of ignorance, the basic mode of desire, pretends to not know is truth. So it is not just that desire is false, but that the very existence of desire as such, the very space in which desire exists, comes into being as a function of the ignorance of truth. Thus desire is a function of truth, of the ignorance of truth, and thus an inverse function of truth.

*So in this practice we must do everything with detachment.
How are we to detach? We detach by seeing things clearly.*

I take “seeing things clearly” to mean the same thing as “know according to the truth.” And this means to remove the veil of ignorance.

Going back to his teaching on “Right Practice,” after the above quotes, he explicitly distinguishes between two modes of desire, here translated into English as a distinction between “want” and “desire.”

When we know the truth as it is all problems come to an end... Nevertheless, the training is difficult. Why is it difficult? It's difficult because of wanting, tanha. If you don't "want" then you don't practice. But if you practice out of desire you won't see the Dhamma. Think about it, all of you. If you don't want to practice you can't practice. You must first want to practice in order to actually do the practice. Whether stepping forward or stepping back you meet desire. This is why the cultivators of the past have said that this practice is something that's extremely difficult to do.

Shortly after this he explains the difference between the two modes of desire in terms of a coconut metaphor:

*Suppose we went to buy some coconuts in the market, and while we were carrying them back someone asked:
"What did you buy those coconuts for?"
"I bought them to eat."
"Are you going to eat the shells as well?"
"No."
"I don't believe you. If you're not going to eat the shells then why did you buy them also?"
Well what do you say? How are you going to answer their question? We practice with desire. If we didn't have desire we wouldn't practice. Practicing with desire is tanha. Contemplating in this way can give rise to wisdom, you know. For example, those coconuts: Are you going to eat the shells as well? Of course not. Then why do you take them? Because the time hasn't yet come for you to throw them away. They're useful for wrapping up the coconut in. If, after eating the coconut, you throw the shells away, there is no problem. Our practice is like this. The Buddha said, "Don't act on desire, don't speak from desire, don't eat with desire." Standing, walking, sitting or reclining...whatever...don't do it with desire. This means to do it with detachment. It's just like buying the coconuts from the market. We're not going to eat the shells but it's not yet time to throw them away. We keep them first. This is how the practice is. Concept and Transcendence are co-existent, just like a coconut. The flesh,*

the husk and the shell are all together. When we buy it we buy the whole

And there is a footnote that explains what he means by Concept and Transcendence:

Concept (sammutti) refers to supposed or provisional reality, while transcendence (vimutti) refers to the liberation from attachment to or delusion within it.

So the point of the metaphor is that, just as there are two parts to a coconut, the husk and the shell on one hand and the flesh on the other, one part that is not food (false food) and the other that is food (just plain food), so there are two types of desire, one that causes suffering (false desire) and one that leads to satisfaction (just plain desire). And we can extrapolate from this footnote that the Venerable Ajahn Chah is saying that we can distinguish between the two types of desire in technical Buddhist terms as provisional or contingent desire and transcendent desire, between sammutti desire and vimutti desire.

And finally, we can bring this distinction between the two types of desire back once again to the ground of truth by pointing out that this distinction between the two modes of desire is isomorphic with and, I suggest, a function of the two types of truth—contingent truth (Sanskrit *samvrtisatya*) and absolute truth (Sanskrit *paramarthasatya*).⁶ There is no lack in absolute truth, so in the final analysis there can be no true desire. But in the realm of contingent truth there is contingent lack, and thus contingent desire. And thus, just as there are degrees of falsity within the sphere of contingent truth, so there are degrees of false desire. So at bottom all desire is a function of falsity, but some desire is more false than other desire. Thus, for example, the desire for relief from suffering is more pure than the desire for money, but in the end even the desire for relief from suffering causes suffering.

Third, I would like to mention the even more explicit teaching of another Buddhist monk, which I found by chance after I delivered this paper at the conference. I found a transcript of an interesting seminar on the Five Aggregates given in 1994 by Venerable Thubten Pende, about whom I know nothing except that

⁶According to the Encyclopedia Britannica “Nagarjuna, the 2nd/3rd-century founder of the Madhyamika (Middle View) school, expounded the two aspects of truth: the empirical truth (*samvrti-satya*) and the ultimate real truth (*paramartha-satya*). Ultimate truth is beyond word and thought and can be positively grasped only by intuition. Empirical truth, on the other hand, is based upon knowledge of the external world by means of verbal designation (i.e. language (note added by CP)). In the final analysis, however, phenomenal existence has no independent substantiality corresponding to the words (i.e. language) used to describe it.” I have found a very helpful discussion of this distinction by Denmo Lochö Rinpoche (the ex-abbot of Namgyel, His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s monastery in Dharamsala, India) at the following address: <http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/twotruths.html>.

he is said to have been head teacher at a certain Nalanda Monastery in France. At the very beginning of this seminar he said (Pende 1994):

the Buddha found that all of suffering is derived from a mistake in cognition

which is another way of saying that suffering is a function of falsity. And specifically in regard to the Buddha's teaching that desire is what causes suffering he said,

we should know that he was not referring to all desire. For instance the desire to be happy is not a source of problems. The desire to escape one's problems is also not the source of suffering. So he was referring to a specific type of desire, and that being a desire whose object appears as the source of happiness when in fact it is not. So it is a desire with respect to or, a desire towards an hallucination, and the means of eliminating that desire is by discovering that the object is an hallucination.

At the end of this line of reasoning he begins to pass over into the Third Noble Truth, which speaks to the question of the cure for this suffering. And in the present context it is obvious that the cure is truth. We must eliminate hallucinatory desire, false desire, which means that we must eliminate falsity. And we eliminate falsity by seeing through the veil of ignorance so that we can realize the truth. This then is the third premise.

The third premise of the Buddhist theory of language:

The cure for this suffering is the realization of truth.

Thus we are brought back again in our discussion of desire to the fundamental ground of the Four Noble Truths, the fundamental ground of the Buddha's teaching, which is truth. We must constantly bear in mind that the Buddha's teaching is framed from the very beginning as being about truth, and the interplay between falsity and truth. So the point of this teaching is that the chronic suffering that plagues the human species is caused by falsity, as embodied in and invested with the value and force of false desire, and that the cure is the realization of truth, which results in the death, not of desire, but of the falsity that has contaminated desire, and thus brings an end to the cycle of rebirth.

Now I would like to focus our attention on the fact that this suffering that plagues mankind has three general characteristics: it is chronic and systematic and generic. I say that the suffering is chronic, using the medical term, rather than

saying that it is continuous, because, while it does last for a long time and it recurs frequently, it is not strictly speaking continuous. To be precise, it is episodic.

This suffering is continuous in the sense that it continues throughout the life of the normal human being, and it has continued throughout all of recorded history, and it continues to take place all over the face of the earth both in the East and in the West. But it would be misleading to characterize this suffering as a continuous phenomenon. It is a continuous series of episodes of suffering, episodes that begin and end, episodes of greater and lesser intensity, episodes that are sometimes repeated over and over again, sometimes varying to a greater or lesser degree in plot or form or style, sometimes jumping abruptly from the middle of one situation to another.

So the continuity of this suffering is like that of a soap opera on television. It may last only an hour each day, but it comes back again every day, and it continues for years and years. It is constantly changing characters and situations, and yet it always remaining the same in that the characters are always entangled in the same sorts of problematic situations and are constantly suffering. Thus this suffering is manifest as a series of related events, related by the common theme of problemativeness and suffering. This series of episodes is what is called *karma* in the technical terminology of Buddhism. And this is the dramatistic setting in which language takes place. Language is the medium in which the episodes are played out. Karma is the texture of language.

The second characteristic of this suffering is that it is generic, generic to the human species. To use another medical term, it is literally endemic, a Greek word which means "in people." It is found in all people, in all cultures and all races at all times throughout history. And, while it is true that all animals, and perhaps even plants, experience suffering, this chronic and persistent type of suffering that is a function of falsity is found preeminently if not only in human beings. Thus we may conclude that this type of suffering is a distinctive characteristic of the human species. It is generic to the human species.

Since this suffering is chronic and generic to the human species, we must suppose that the false beliefs that cause it are also chronic and generic to the human species. In other words, it is not just a few deviant individuals here and there, or just a few deviant cultures that happen, incidentally, to harbor false beliefs, but all normal people in all cultures. So it is not just a few beliefs here and there that happen, incidentally, to be false, but rather it is a matter of systematically false beliefs. We are led to the conclusion that the systems of beliefs, the normal worldviews, of all cultures are false, and that each of the many conventional systems of beliefs is wholly and comprehensively false. The suffering is chronic,

generic, and systematic, so we must conclude that the falsity of the beliefs that cause the suffering is correspondingly chronic, generic, and systematic.

Thus we are led by the Four Noble Truths, together with our knowledge of human beings, to the somewhat perplexing conclusion that all normal people in all cultures come to hold a system of beliefs that is comprehensively and systematically false. And, what is perhaps even more bewildering, we are led to the conclusion that people, normal people, all normal people in all cultures, persist in clinging to their systems of false beliefs in spite of the chronic suffering those false beliefs causes.

In light of these conclusions, or facts, about the nature of this suffering, the Third Noble Truth, that there is a cure, becomes something of a puzzle. Given the above, the cure for suffering is obvious: to realize the truth. So the puzzle is: Why and how do people come to hold comprehensive systems of false beliefs in the first place? And why do people persist in clinging to their system of false beliefs in spite of the suffering they cause? And on a more concrete level, why do people tolerate, even desire, suffering? And on a more philosophical level, probably the most puzzling question of all, how can mere falsity, which has no more substance or force than a bubble or a shadow, so comprehensively and persistently overpower truth? How can that which is not overpower that which is? What is the mechanism of this bizarre inversion of being, of value, of force?

This, I suggest, is where language comes in. I suggest that language is the mechanism by which this systematic inversion takes place. Language is the mechanism by which it is engendered and transmitted, and the mechanism that enables it to persist.

If you put aside your presuppositions about the nature of language, and go back to the beginning and analyze language in the context of the Four Noble Truths and in the context of the questions I have posed above, you will find that language is not what it seems to be. It is an inherently dualistic, which is to say, duplicitous, type of phenomenon. Or rather, to be more precise, you will find that language is not a type of phenomenon, but a type of epiphenomenon. That is, the elements of language are of the same ontological order as a shadow or an echo. We often talk as if language consisted of sound, but, as linguists have discovered, the form of language does not consist of sound: when you analyze the forms of language (discourse structure, sentence grammar, word morphology, and finally, at bottom, phonology), you are dealing with conventions, not with sound. And when you get down to the level of actual sound, you are no longer in the realm of language, but in the realm of physics.

You can approach this from another angle. It is obvious to everyone that language is a system of representations. But what is not so obvious is that every

representation is also a misrepresentation, and thus a duplicity. And from this it follows that the forms and elements of language are conventionalized duplicities. So language is a conventional institutionalization of a vastly complex system of duplicitous representations of the world. And thus it is, I suggest, through the machinery of language that people come to hold and persist in holding a system of beliefs about the world and about their own nature that is systematically false.

Of course, this is contrary to the conventional idea of language. For the most part, people have no conscious idea of language whatever. For the most part, the normal person relates to his language as a fish relates to water: he is unaware of language. Language is the medium in which the normal person exists and in which he struggles to carry on his life, but he is not aware of the fact that his existence as a normal person is a function of language, that it is a limited part of the universe, and a duplicitous one at that. The normal person thinks the world that his language represents is the real world, and he thinks it is the whole world. Thus the conventional view of language is not only almost entirely unconscious, but it is also in error.

And when people do become more sophisticated and become aware of language and formulate some conscious ideas about language, it is almost always seen as a useful, even necessary, tool, like our eyes or our legs. But this belief is also wrong. It is based on a naïve faith in the representations of language. And this is the root of the whole system of false beliefs, the system of conventional beliefs, i.e. language, which is what causes the chronic suffering that the Buddha's teaching is about. So the fourth premise of the Buddhist theory of language is this:

The fourth premise of the Buddhist theory of language:

Language is the conventional institutionalization of the system of false beliefs that causes the suffering that plagues mankind.

This premise leads to the practical conclusion that we should try to understand the Buddhist theory of language, not only for the purpose of making sense of language, but also, and more importantly, for the purpose of alleviating our own suffering, and perhaps that of others.

2. The right point of view

Now you may have noticed that, although we set down the fourth premise of the Buddhist theory of language, we have not discussed the fourth Noble Truth yet. The fourth Noble Truth sets forth the eight-fold path that leads to the cessation of

suffering. The first aspect of the eight-fold path is **right view**. So as we begin to explore the Buddhist theory of language we must take care to be sure that we take the right point of view. As the Venerable Phra Ajaan Chah said:

In our practice we must have “Right View” (sammaditthi). If our view is right then everything else is right: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection, Right Concentration—the Eightfold Path. When there is Right View all the other factors will follow on.

If you consider the situation of Buddhism in relation to science as seen from the conventional point of view, the view of the ordinary person, you might think of a Buddhist theory of language as being independent of the scientific theory of language, as represented in Figure 1. Most people think of

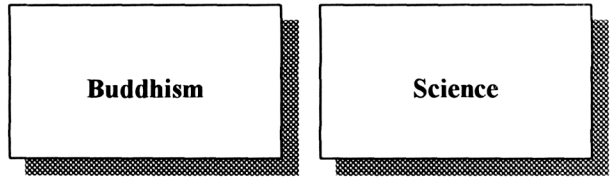


Figure 1. A common point of view

Buddhism as one realm of life and science as another. Perhaps a person gets up early in the morning to give food to the monks and then he goes to work as a scientist and he considers the two worlds to have nothing to do with each other. But this is a wrong point of view.

Or if you look at the situation of Buddhism from the currently prevailing scientific point of view, which I will call the conventional scientific point of view, you might think of the Buddhist theory as being subordinate to the scientific point of view, as represented in Figure 2. But this is also a wrong point of view.

However, if you look at the situation of Buddhism, and the Buddhist theory of language, from the Buddhist point of view, as framed by the Four Noble Truths, it is clear that the Buddhist point of view is more comprehensive than the conventional scientific point of view. That is, the conventional scientific point of view excludes certain categories of phenomena which are included in the Buddhist point of view, but the Buddhist point of view includes every category of phenomena that is included in the former.

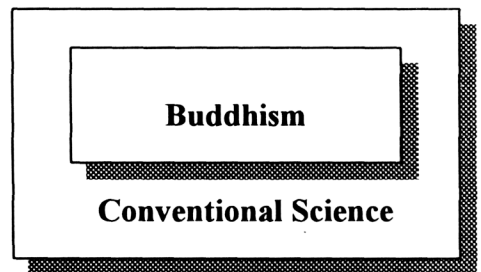


Figure 2. The point of view of conventional science

There are two obvious types of phenomena that are excluded from the conventional scientific point of view and are included in the Buddhist scientific point of view: Suffering and Truth.

First, the prevailing scientific point of view excludes the whole vast category of phenomena subsumed under the name of suffering, not by explicit premise, but by tacit agreement, by tacit conspiracy. But, as framed by the Four Noble Truths, a Buddhist science of human nature would not only include this category of phenomena, but would take it as central. Of course all living things suffer, but the human species experiences a type of chronic and endemic suffering that no other species does. So a Buddhist science would consider man primarily as *Homo pathos* and only secondarily as *Homo sapiens*. But the prevailing conventional versions of the human sciences (psychology, anthropology, and linguistics) systematically ignore the fact of human suffering. Similarly, science in general, even medical science, tends to exclude all suffering except that which can be explained as the function of physical cause.

Second, the prevailing scientific point of view excludes truth. A Buddhist science of human nature would not only include truth, but it would take it as central. The very title of the first teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble *Truths*, implies that truth is the fundamental ground of the human situation, as distinct from the grass situation, or the rock situation. That is, truth plays an important role in the human situation, but not very important in the grass situation or the rock situation. More specifically, Buddhism holds that the cause of the characteristically human type of suffering is false belief. And, of course, falsity is an inverse function of truth. Thus chronic suffering is an inverse function of truth.

Why does the prevailing scientific point of view exclude these dimensions of human life? One answer is this: Because the prevailing scientific point of view is based on the premise that all other points of view can be reduced to the point of view of the science of physics. Or in other words, from the prevailing scientific point of view only physical phenomena are considered to be real. Another answer, a deeper answer, is this: The conventional point of view is based on ignorance of truth, and of the suffering that the ignorance of truth causes. The conventional point of view is a field of ignorance. Fundamental ignorance, the ignorance of truth, provides the ground in which conventional value can take the place of truth value. And the prevailing scientific point of view grows out of the conventional point of view, so the prevailing scientific point of view also ignores those phenomena. So from the Buddhist point of view, the currently prevailing scientific point of view should be characterized as the *conventional* scientific point of view.

So from the Buddhist point of view what is at issue here is not the Buddhist point of view as opposed to the scientific point of view. Nor is the issue to try to explain the Buddhist point of view from the prevailing scientific point of view. What is at issue is how to reframe the conventional scientific point of view and modify it so that it will fit coherently on the foundation of the Buddhist scientific point of view. Thus the Buddhist theory of language should be framed in relation to the conventional point of view and the conventional scientific theory of language as in Figure 3. And the preeminent example of the conventional scientific theory of language is Noam Chomsky's theory of language.

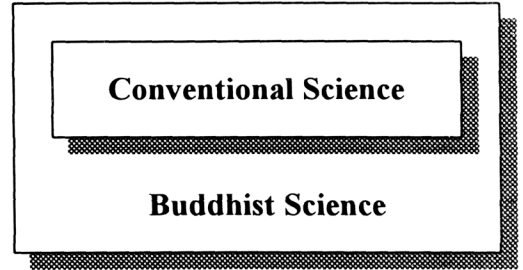


Figure 3. The point of view of Buddhist science

3. The difference between conventional science & Buddhist science

In this section I will make explicit some of the basic premises by which Conventional science differs from Buddhist science, though I will not have time to explore them here in this forum.

3.1 *Some premises of the conventional theory of language*

- 3.1.1 Only physical things are real. Thus everything can be explained as a function of physical causality, and all natural law can be reduced to the laws of the science of physics. There is no such thing as truth; everything is relative. What is called truth is only a matter of belief, opinion, or convention.
- 3.1.2 Therefore, language is a function of biology, chemistry, and physics.
- 3.1.3 Language is a good thing, like eyes or feet, because it confers on us the ability to interact with reality in ways that we could not do without it.
- 3.1.4 Language provides an accurate representation of reality.
- 3.1.5 Conventional science takes the objective point of view, and excludes the subjective point of view. It excludes persons in general, and yet it takes the objective point of view, which is the third person point of view. (Here is a paradox: the idea of subject and object is a function of language, specifically the grammar of personal pronouns; thus **science presupposes the grammar of personal pronouns** in framing its impersonal third person point of view.

This argues that conventional science presupposes language and is built upon the conceptual framework of language.)

- 3.1.6 Conventional science limits itself to phenomena that can be repeated; it excludes one-time or two-time phenomena such as truth and coincidence. Science excludes jokes, art, dance for example.
- 3.1.7 Conventional science limits itself to the study of that which can be represented symbolically and to reasoning in accord with the laws of symbolic logic. Thus, again, the conventional scientific point of view is subsequent to language, because symbols and symbolic logic are a function of language.
- 3.1.8 Conventional Science does not recognize the fact that the normal human being is plagued by a peculiarly human type of suffering. It does not admit that suffering is normal. Thus the sciences of man, anthropology and psychology, are not centered upon the question of why man suffers and are not concerned with the problem of how to alleviate his suffering.
- 3.1.9 Conventional Science holds that language has no power. And there is no truth, so truth also has no power. All power is considered to be a function of the physical. Stalin put it thus: "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

3.2 *Some premises of the Buddhist theory of language*

- 3.2.1 Physical causality does not explain everything. There are phenomena that are a function of truth, and the interplay of truth and falsity. This is the realm of signs, which belongs to the science of semiosis, not the science of physics.
- 3.2.2 There are laws of truth, and they are presupposed by the science of physics.
- 3.2.3 The realm of signs is the realm of dualism, i.e. duplicity.
- 3.2.4 All signs are duplicitous. All representation is misrepresentation. Language is super duplicitous. Language is a system of representations (= misrepresentations) that have become conventionally institutionalized.
- 3.2.5 The main function of language is not to communicate, but to provide the means to escape from and to defend against truth. Language functions as a vastly complex fantasy machine.
- 3.2.6 Language may be beneficial in some ways, but it is certainly a dangerous thing, especially if you do not realize that it is dangerous. It has been likened to a poisonous serpent: If you don't handle it with knowledge and care, it will bite you. So better be sure you know what you are doing with language.
- 3.2.7 It is not so much that we speak language, but rather language speaks us. We are creatures of language, not language is our creature. As C. S. Peirce said, man is a sign.

- 3.2.8 Language has its being in the realm of duplicity, which is a kind of gravitational field whose geometric center and dynamic force is truth. Language is an inverse function of truth. Language arises from truth. It grows by a series of oppositions, bifurcations, which are duplicities, in a branching tree-like manner from the ground of truth. So language naturally tends to collapse into truth, just as a tree tends to collapse to the ground. Hence the beneficial effects of meditation.
- 3.2.9 Personal pronouns are elements in the logic of grammar. Roman Jakobson described them as “shifters” because they do not refer to any particular thing. A pronoun is rather a variable, an unspecified and unknown entity like the “x” and “y” in a formula like “f(x, y).” A pronoun is just a place holder, an index in a grammatical structure. Thus the pronouns “I” and “you” and “he” do not refer to anything specific in reality.
- 3.2.10 Truth has power. Thus, language has power—the power of truth, and falsity.

4. The basic paradigm of the Buddhist theory of language

In this section I will briefly explain the basic paradigm that is at the center of the Buddhist theory of language, the paradigm that governs the dynamic and function and form of language.

The fundamental law of language is this:

4.1 *Language is a function of truth*

- 4.1.1 Language exists in the field of truth.
- 4.1.2 Language is governed by the laws of truth.
- 4.1.3 Language is an inverse function of truth.

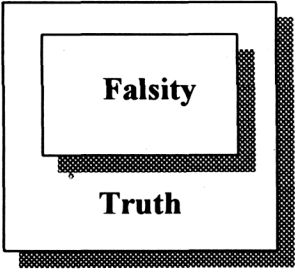
4.2 *There is truth*

“There is no truth,” said one. The other said, “But you are yourself assuming that it is a truth that there is no truth.”

The logical force displayed in this sentence is an indication that through the logic that is in language from the very beginning, truth is automatically manifest in language. Through its very structure language brings truth to man: truth presses itself on him before he seeks it out for himself. (Max Picard, p. 17-18)

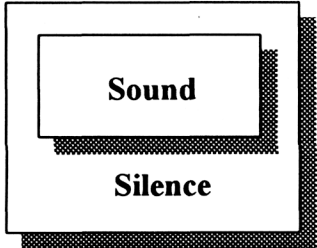
4.3 *There are laws of truth*

- 4.3.1 Truth is first, false is second
- 4.3.2 Falsity is a function of truth
- 4.3.3 Truth is one, false is many
- 4.3.4 Truth is simple, false is complex
- 4.3.5 Truth makes itself known, false covers up
- 4.3.6 Truth is open, false is closed
- 4.3.7 Truth satisfies, false causes suffering
- 4.3.8 Truth is good, false is bad
- 4.3.9 Truth does not change, false changes.



4.4 *The corollary relation between silence and sound*

- 4.4.1 Silence is first, sound is second
- 4.4.2 Sound interrupts silence
- 4.4.3 Sound is produced by the interruption of breathing
- 4.4.4 Sound is the effect of resistance, conflict, turmoil
- 4.4.5 Sound implies falsity, resistance, objection
- 4.4.6 Silence implies truth, acceptance, agreement
- 4.4.7 Thus, silence = truth, sound = falsity
- 4.4.8 Hence, the more sound = the more falsity
- 4.4.9 Consonants interrupt vowels
- 4.4.10 Consonants are even falser than vowels.



4.5 *This is the basic paradigm of the Buddhist theory of language*

Truth	Falsity
Silence	Sound

This is the conceptual matrix that governs language. The relation between truth and falsity governs the energetics and the semantics of language. The relation between silence and sound, as a function of its correlation with the relation of truth and falsity, governs the form of language.

5. One line of argument: markedness and language universals

In this section I will sketch one line of reasoning that follows from the basic paradigm and argues in support of the Buddhist theory of language.

It is commonly assumed that the forms, i.e. the conventions, of language are arbitrary. But linguists have discovered that there is a type of predictability, which has been described in terms of markedness and language universals.⁷

5.1 Three examples of markedness phenomena

5.1.1 There is a Universal Law: If a language distinguishes number in its grammar, then the plural is marked and the singular is unmarked. For example, consider the way number is marked in English. The plural is normally marked by adding a suffix, the singular is unmarked. While there are nouns that are not marked for plural, there are no nouns that are marked for singular.

Singular	Plural
Cat	Cat +s
Dish	Dish +es

5.1.2 There is another Universal Law: If a language distinguishes tense in its grammar, the past is marked. English provides an example of this too.

Present	Past
Look	Look +ed
Talk	Talk +ed

5.1.3 Another Universal Law: the phoneme /f/ is marked in relation to the phoneme /p/. So if a language has the phoneme /f/, then it will have the phoneme /p/, but not vice versa.

- 5.1.3.1 Thus there are languages that have /p/ but not /f/ (e.g. Tagblog), but there are no languages that have /f/ but not /p/.
- 5.1.3.2 Also, in languages that have both /p/ and /f/, children learn words that have /p/ before words that have /f/, and they erroneously substitute /p/ for /f/
- 5.1.3.3 Roman Jakobson (1969, p. 159) cites the following example of a type of language disorder that is predictable as a function of this law of markedness:

⁷The concept of markedness was first introduced in linguistics in Trubetzkoy (Translated into English in 1969). The use of conditional universals as a way of describing markedness phenomena first appeared in Greenberg (1966). The first systematic and comprehensive explanation of markedness and language universals was Jakobson (1968) A recent introduction to and survey of markedness and language universals is Battistella (1990).

MacKay (1970b:320) cites the dialogue of a mother with her child, who months earlier had been able to produce [f] and [p] in his babbling and now asked her to "give me my pork" (meaning fork); when she handed him his fork, saying in his style "Here is your pork," she received the answer: "No, no! Pork! Pork!"

5.2 *Conventional theories of language cannot explain markedness phenomena, but the Buddhist theory of language can*

- 5.2.1 First, conventional theories traditionally explained sameness across languages as a function of historical relatedness (language evolution, similar in form to biological evolution) or historical contact (borrowing). Chomsky introduced the idea of biological explanation, i.e. some things are hypothecated to be the same because they are governed by the same gene or brain structure, though no such biological causes have been found as yet. Nevertheless, none of these mechanisms can explain markedness phenomena.
- 5.2.2 Further, markedness phenomena are relations between opposites, but they are asymmetrical. Conventional symbolic logic assumes that the relation of opposition is symmetrical, and so there is no way of describing relations of asymmetrical opposition, let alone explaining the asymmetry. So conventional thinking either has to discount the facts of markedness or it has to consider them anomalous.
- 5.2.3 Further, even if conventional thinking were to allow asymmetric relations, the conventional theory cannot explain which of the two is prior, or why.
- 5.2.4 And, apart from the above conceptual problems, where conventional thinking does make a prediction as to relations of priority in language, it is wrong. For example conventional thinking holds that the past is first and the present is second. But the facts of markedness as mentioned in the English example above are contrary to this view. The universal fact is that the present is unmarked and the past is marked, i.e. the present is conceptually prior to the past. This is the order which the Buddhist theory of language predicts. Thus in sum:

	First	Second
The conventional theory predicts this order	Past	Present
The Buddhist theory predicts this order	Present	Past

5.3 *The Buddhist theory of language implies the law of markedness*

- 5.3.1 The basic paradigm of the Buddhist theory of language as outlined above implies a simple and obvious law of markedness, which can be formulated in various more or less equivalent ways. Here are three variants:

*The second is marked.
A mark is a sign of a second.
No mark is a sign of a first*

From this it follows that:

5.3.2 The true is unmarked – the false is marked

5.3.3 The one is unmarked – the many is marked

5.3.4 Certainty is unmarked – doubt or contingency is marked

5.3.5 Present is one, hence unmarked – past is many, hence marked

5.4 *The law of markedness also governs the form and style of the representations of true and false, good and evil, etc.*

5.4.1 Double talk, forked tongue, *two faced*. (*one-faced)

5.4.2 Straight versus crooked

5.4.3 Good speech is silver, but silence is gold

5.4.4 Fast talker (truth does not change, hence movement implies falsity, more movement = more falsity, thus fast and/or crooked movement imply falsity)

5.4.5 In Balinese performances of the Ramayana the good guy, the White monkey, moves slowly, or not at all; the bad guys, such as the goblins, move quickly and irregularly

5.4.6 Ring of truth (*clatter of truth)

5.4.7 Peace and unity (*war and unity); Divide and conquer

5.4.8 And Jacob said... Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man (Genesis 27.1).

5.5 *Some Examples from Thai*⁸

cay diaw heart only one faithful, constant in love	sǎwɯŋ cay two heart unfaithful
phrá ?èek lord first hero	sǎwɯŋ nâa two face untrustworthy

⁸These examples were provided to me by Dr. Udom Warotamasikkhaadit, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok.

ʔèekkàphâp one condition unity	sǎɔŋ phǒm two hair getting old
ʔèekkàphót one number singular	mii sǎɔŋ hand two used
ʔèekkàchǎn one opinion unanimous	nók sǎɔŋ hǔa bird two head a friend of both sides
ʔèekkàbùrùt one man the best person	sǎam wan dii sii wan khây three day well four day sick not healthy
ʔèekkàmay one form oneness	sǎam sǎlɿŋ fɿaŋ three quarter half quarter be crazy
ʔèekkàràat one king independence	mîit pǎæt dǎan dark eight side be at a loss
ʔèekkàrûp one picture harmonious	hâa tǣæm five mark mistake
ʔèekkàlák one character identity	sǐp pǎæt moŋkùt ten eight crown cheater
sǐi straight honest	khót crooked dishonest

These examples from Thai, together with the English examples cited above, pose a number of questions that are problematic for the conventional theories of language.

- 5.5.1 Why does the English expression “two faced” mean “someone who lies?” Is it just an arbitrary meaning? A matter of chance? Or is there a semantic law at work? If so, what law?
- 5.5.2 Why does “sǎɔŋ nǎa,” which would be translated literally into English as “two-faced,” mean “someone who lies” in Thai? Is this also just an arbitrary meaning? Or is there a semantic law at work here? If so, what law?
- 5.5.3 Why do “two-faced” in English and “sǎɔŋ nǎa” in Thai mean the same thing? Is this coincidence? Or is there a law at work? If so, what law?
- 5.5.4 Why do “crooked” in English and “khót” in Thai both mean “dishonest”?
- 5.5.5 Why do “straight” in English and “sǐi” in Thai both mean “honest”?

6. The Buddha on markedness

I would like to conclude by citing a quote from the teachings of the Buddha, from the Mahayana text, the Vajracchedika, *The Diamond Sutra*, (Conze, p. 28). Here the Buddha explicitly states the principle of the law of markedness as developed above in the framework of the Buddhist theory of language. (*Tathagata* means “thusness,” “that which is,” or in other words, “truth.”)

The Lord continued: ‘What do you think, Subhuti, can the Tathagata be seen by the possession of his marks?’—Subhuti replied: No indeed, O Lord. And why? What has been taught by the Tathagata as the possession of marks, that is truly a no-possession of no-marks.’ The Lord said: ‘Wherever there is possession of marks, there is fraud, wherever there is no-possession of no-marks there is no fraud. Hence the Tathagata is to be seen from no-marks as marks.’

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