Toward a Buddhist Theory of Language

A Seminar Given at

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by

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1. The Basic Message

1.1 There is a Buddhist Theory of Language: The foundation of the Buddhist theory of language was already established in the first teaching of the Buddha—the Four Noble Truths.

1.1.1 The First Noble Truth is that the normal human being is plagued by chronic suffering. This truth gives us the basic motivation for and the first premise of the Buddhist theory of language.

1.1.2 The fact that the first teaching is called the Four Noble Truths makes it clear that what is at issue in this teaching is truth, not physics or biology. So when we come to the Second Noble Truth, that there is a cause of this suffering, we are led to look for a truth-functional cause, not for a physical or biological cause. And so, given that truth is good, this teaching implies that people suffer from the opposite of truth, i.e., falsity. Thus the second premise of the Buddhist theory of language: People suffer from false beliefs.

1.1.3 Since this suffering is chronic and generic to the human species, we must suppose that the false beliefs that are responsible are also chronic and generic. In other words, it is not just some cultures or a few deviant people who happen, incidentally, to suffer from false beliefs, but all normal people in all cultures. And it is not just a few beliefs here and there that happen, incidentally, to be false, but rather it is a matter of a comprehensive system of false beliefs. And, what is more, people persist in clinging to this system of false beliefs in spite of the suffering it causes.

1.1.4 In light of these 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 systems of false beliefs in the first place? And why do people persist in clinging to this system of false beliefs? This is where language comes in. If you analyze language in the context of this question, you will find that language is inherently dualistic, indeed, it is inherently duplicitous. The elements of language are duplicities. So language is a conventional institutionalization of a complex system of duplicities, a system of duplicitous representation of the world. And thus it is through the medium 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.

1.1.5 Of course, this is contrary to conventional beliefs about language. The conventional belief is that language is a useful, even necessary, tool, like our eyes or our legs. But this conventional belief is wrong. And it is the very foundation of the system of false beliefs that causes the chronic suffering that this teaching is about. So the third premise of the Buddhist theory of language is this: Language is the conventional institutionalization of the comprehensive system of false beliefs that causes the suffering that chronically plagues the human species.

1.2 The Buddhist theory is fundamentally different from conventional theories

1.2.1 The science of linguistics (and all disciplines of study that are conceptually downstream from linguistics, which includes all the human sciences, at least) is currently dominated by a family of theories, preeminently exemplified by the theories of Noam Chomsky, which are based on the same fundamental premises. I will refer to this family of theories as the conventional theories.

1.2.2 The key difference between the Buddhist theory and the conventional theories is this: Conventional theories are based on the premise that language is a function of biology, which in turn is a function of physics; the Buddhist theory of language is based on the premise that language is a function of truth, biology and physics being subsequent and incidental.

1.3 The Buddhist theory of language is better

1.3.1 This judgement is not based on faith, or hope, or religious partisanship: it is based on hard scientific argument and on ordinary standards of practical usefulness.

1.3.2 It is better on scientific grounds because it explains the facts better.

1.3.3 It is better on practical grounds because it is more useful in teaching foreign language, in treating speech pathologies (aphasia, stuttering, etc.). And most important, it can help to alleviate human suffering.

1.4 So we should try to develop an understanding of the Buddhist theory of language.
2. The Right Point of View

The fourth Noble Truth describes the eight-fold path that leads to the alleviation of suffering. The first aspect of the eight-fold path that is mentioned 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.

If you look at the situation of Buddhism from the conventional point of view of the ordinary person, you might be led to think of a Buddhist theory of language as being independent of the scientific theory of language, as represented in Figure 1. 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 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 phenomena which are included in the Buddhist point of view, but the latter includes every type of phenomena that is included in the former. 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 chronic human suffering. But, in accord with the Four Noble Truths, a Buddhist science of human nature would focus attention upon and be centered upon the fact that human beings are universally plagued by a distinctively human type of suffering.

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 to be at least as much Homo pathos as Homo sapiens. But the prevailing human sciences (psychology, anthropology, and linguistics) systematically ignore the fact of systematic human suffering. Similarly, science in general, and medical science in particular, tends to exclude all suffering except that which is the function of material cause.

Second, the prevailing scientific point of view excludes truth. A Buddhist science of human nature would not only include truth, but it would be centered upon truth. The very title of the first teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, frames truth as the dimension of the human situation. More specifically, Buddhism explains 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 material 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. This ignorance provides the frame of reference 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 it too 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, e.g., Chomsky’s theory of language, as represented in Figure 3.
3. The Difference Between Conventional Science & Buddhist Science

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, and acoustics.

3.1.3 Language is a good thing, like eyes or feet, because it gives us the ability to interact with reality in ways that we could not do without it.

3.1.4 Language truly represents reality.

3.1.5 Conventional science takes the objective point of view, and excludes the subjective point of view. Science excludes persons in general, and yet it takes 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 is conceptually downstream from language.)

3.1.6 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, for example.

3.1.7 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, this 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 situation is plagued by a peculiarly human type of suffering. Science 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. 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 There is something outside of the realm of physical causality. There are phenomena that are a function of the interplay of truth and falsity. This is the realm of signs, which belongs to the science of semiosis as distinct from the science of physics.

3.2.2 There are laws of truth, and they are prior to and 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 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 vast 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. I has been likened to a poisonous serpent.

3.2.7 It is not so much that we speak language, but rather language speaks us. Do we use language, or does language use us?

3.2.8 Language has its being in the realm of duplicity, a kind of gravitational field whose center and 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 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 logical structure. Thus the pronoun “I” does not refer to anything in reality.

3.2.10 Truth has power. Thus, language has power—the power of truth, and falsity.
4. The Fundamental Paradigm of the Buddhist Theory of Language

4.1 The Fundamental Law: Language is a Function of Truth

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

4.2 There Are Laws of Truth

4.2.1 Truth is first, false is second
4.2.2 Truth is one, false is many
4.2.3 Truth is one, false is double (= many)
4.2.4 Truth is simple, false is complex
4.2.5 Truth makes itself known, false covers up
4.2.6 Truth is open, false is closed
4.2.7 Truth satisfies, false causes suffering
4.2.8 Truth is good, false is bad
4.2.9 Truth does not change, false changes

4.3 The Relation between Silence and Sound

4.3.1 Silence is first, sound is second
4.3.2 Sound interrupts silence
4.3.3 Sound is produced by the interruption of breathing
4.3.4 Sound is the effect of resistance, conflict, turmoil
4.3.5 Sound is associated with falsity, resistance, objection
4.3.6 Silence is associated with truth, acceptance, agreement
4.3.7 Silence = truth, sound = falsity
4.3.8 The more sound = The more falsity
4.3.9 Consonants interrupt vowels

4.4 The Correlation of Silence/Sound with Truth/False Comprises the Basic Paradigm of the Buddhist Theory of Language

These relations are the basis of logic and semantics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This relation is the basis of form

| Silence | Sound |

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"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)
5. **One Line of Argument: Markedness and Language Universals**

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 that can be described in terms of markedness and language universals.

5.1 **Three Examples of Markedness Phenomena**

5.1.1 Fact One — Universal Law: If a language distinguishes number in its grammar, the plural is marked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Cat +s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dish</td>
<td>Dish +es</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.2 Fact Two — Universal Law: If a language distinguishes tense in its grammar, the past is marked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look</td>
<td>Look +ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk</td>
<td>Talk +ed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.3 Fact Three — Universal Law: the phoneme /f/ is marked in relation to the phoneme /p/, i.e., If a language has the phoneme /f/, then it will have the phoneme /p/.

5.1.3.1 Thus there are languages that have /p/ but not /f/ (e.g., Tagalog), but there are no languages that have /f/ but not /p/.

5.1.3.2 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:

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 **The conventional theories of language cannot explain markedness phenomena**

5.2.1 First, conventional theories traditionally explained sameness across languages as a function of historical sameness (language evolution) or historical contact (borrowing). Chomsky introduced the idea of biological explanation. But none of these can explain markedness phenomena.

5.2.2 Further, markedness phenomena are relations between opposites, but they are asymmetrical. Conventional 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 disallow the facts or it has to consider them anomalous.

5.2.3 Further, even where conventional thinking allows asymmetric relations (but not as opposition), the conventional theory cannot explain which of the two is prior, or why.

5.2.4 Further, where conventional thinking does make a prediction, it is wrong. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The conventional theory predicts this order</td>
<td>Past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Buddhist theory predicts this order</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. The Buddhist theory of language explains markedness phenomena

6.1 The Law of Markedness

6.1.1 Given the basic paradigm of the Buddhist theory of language as outlined in section 4, a simple and obvious law of markedness can be formulated thus:

**The second is marked.**

or

**A mark is a sign of a second.**

or

**No mark is a sign of a first**

6.1.2 The true is unmarked – the false is marked
6.1.3 The one is unmarked – the many is marked
6.1.4 Certainty is unmarked – doubt or contingency is marked
6.1.5 Present is one, hence unmarked – past is many, hence marked

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

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

6.2.2 Straight versus crooked

6.2.3 Good speech is silver, but silence is gold.

6.2.4 Fast talker (truth does not change, hence movement implies falsity, more movement = more falsity, thus fast and/or crooked movement imply falsity)
6.2.5 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

6.2.6 Ring of truth (*clatter of truth)

6.2.7 Peace and unity (*war and unity)
6.2.8 Divide and conquer

6.2.9 And Jacob said . . . Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man (Genesis 27.1)
7. Some Examples from Thai

(Examples provided by Dr. Udom Warotamasikkaadit, Ramkhamhaeng University.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thai Word</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cay diaw</td>
<td>heart only one faithful, constant in love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phrá ðéek</td>
<td>lord first hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?éekkâphap</td>
<td>one condition unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?éekkâph´</td>
<td>one number singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkâhà</td>
<td>one opinion unanimous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkâ hee</td>
<td>one place individually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkà ōr</td>
<td>one man the best person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkà ay</td>
<td>one form oneness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkâraa</td>
<td>one king independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkâ p</td>
<td>one picture harmonious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?ékkâ ák</td>
<td>one character identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>straight honest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.1 Why does “two-faced” mean “someone who lies” in English?
7.2 Why does “sðñtą aa” mean “someone who lies” in Thai?
7.3 Why do “two-faced” and “sðñąż aa” mean the same thing?
7.4 Why do “crooked” and “kh´” both mean “dishonest”?
7.5 Why do “straight” and “s” both mean “honest”?

sðñį cay two heart unfaithful
sðñį aa two face untrustworthy
sðñį ph” two hair getting old
k sðñį h”a bird two head a friend of both sides
yín sāa ph´ a chaay sāa woman three husband man three temple bad women and bad men
sāa wa ñii wa khay three day well four day sick not healthy
sāa sā´ų aj three quarter half quarter be crazy
p´ daa dark eight side be at a loss
haa five mark mistake
ñp´ ŋk´ ten eight crown cheater
kh´ crooked dishonest
8. Some Quotes

8.1 Charles Pyle

The normal human being has been colonized, enslaved by language. Language is embodied in breath. Thus
language is parasitic upon the breath. The breath is the means of colonization, of enslavement, so breath is the
means of liberation. Thus the Buddhist way of liberation, meditation, centers upon the breath.

8.2 Jacques Lacan

…man is the subject captured and tortured by language (p. 243)

8.3 Max Picard

Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot exist without silence (Op cit p. 13) Language comes from
silence and returns to silence (p. 29) The world of language is built over and above the world of silence. (22)

8.4 Charles S. Peirce

The essence of truth lies in its resistance to being ignored (Collected Works, 2.139).

8.5 Noam Chomsky

“the study of language is a part of human biology,” Rules And Representations, p. 226.

8.6 Stephen Pinker

One patient could not name fruits…Does this mean that the brain has a produce section? No, one has found
one, nor centers for inflections, traces, phonology, and so on. Pinning brain areas to mental functions has been
frustrating. Frequently one finds two patients with lesions in the same general area but with different kinds of
impairment, or two patients with the same impairment but lesions in different areas. (The Language Instinct:
How the Mind Creates Language, p. 319)

For all we know, the brain might have regions dedicated to processes as specific as noun phrases and metrical
trees; our methods for studying the human brain are still so crude that we would be unable to find them. (320)

…this neuro-mythological quest…for “grammar genes.” (326)

For any grammar gene that exists in every human being, there is currently no way to verify its existence
directly. (327)

8.7 The Buddha

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.’

(from the Vajracchedika, The Diamond Sutra, Trans. Edward Conze, p. 28)
9. Bibliography


Pinker, Stephen. The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language

Pyle, Charles. (forthcoming) On the Duplicity of Language. (A draft copy of this book, which explains the present line of reasoning in more detail, can be read at http://www.conknet.com/~mmagnus/dup/Pyle.html)


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2The 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).