

Buddhist Tipiṭakan Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics is a discipline of interpretation and explanation of the scriptures of any religion. An attempt to connect the term with the name of Hermes, though attempted, cannot be justified. Hermes was a messenger of God and not an interpreter of the divine message. The term is derived from a word used in Greek which was originally a loan word from a non-Indo-European family of language. It means an ‘interpreter’.

The necessity of interpretation of the *Buddhavacana* was felt at a very early date, nay, immediately after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Blessed One, who when living was often consulted for the exact import of his sayings. His senior (*Thera-s*) monks like Ānanda (authority on *Sutta*), Upāli (authority on Vinaya), Mahākassapa (an all rounder), Sāriputta (an ‘intelligent’ par excellence) were no doubt available for consultation on the ‘meaning of the words of the Buddha’, and yet it was essential to have an approved permanent stock of principles of interpretation. The Buddha spoke in ways more than one (*anekapariyāyena dhammo pakāsito*). *Pariyāyabhāsita*, *sandhāyabhāsita*, *sabhāvabhāsita* were the three principal modes. The sermons (*sutta-s*) were mainly two-fold: Direct (*Nītattha*) and Interpretable (*Neyattha*). The Buddha used self-made *adhivacana-s* which marked ‘special lexica’ (as in the case of the Vedic language) and offered re-interpretations of old standard words, preferring fresh derivations (as in the case of Vedic ritualistic *Brāhmaṇa*-literature).

Even before the commentators like Buddhaghosa (C.E. 500 onwards) came to our help for explaining the entire *Buddhavacana*, a few commentary-like portions were inserted by the redactors of the canon (*saṅgītikāra-s*). These are the *Cūlaniddesa*, the *Mahāniddesa* and the like. *Milindapañha* (circa 150 B.C.E.) proved as a superb specimen of Apologetics, pointing out consistencies and harmony in apparently inconsistent sayings of the Buddha, serving the same cause as was served by the *Virodha-parihāra* and *Samanvaya*-sections of the *Brahma-sūtra-s* on the *Upaniṣad-s*.

A certain training was necessary for the *Aṭṭhakathākāra-s* (interpreters of ‘meaning’) and, as if to open workshops for them, treatises like *Nettī* (The Guide) and *Peṭakopadesa* (*Pṭṭaka*-Expositor) were written. Without being direct commentaries, these two unique tracts proved themselves as “Trainers of commentators”; they aimed at not ‘constructing’ but ‘scaffolding’. It was not for nothing that in their *Chaṭṭhasangāna* the Burmese (present Myanmar) tradition accepted *Milindapañha*, *Nettī* and *Peṭakopadesa* as parts of the canon (*Khuddakanikāya*).