

AN APPLICATION OF THE DEBATE BETWEEN GADAMER'S AND HABERMAS' HERMENEUTICS TO A BUDDHIST STUDY OF NAGA FIREBALLS OR MEKONG LIGHTS (BUNG FAI PAYA NAK)

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ABSTRACT

Naga Fireballs (Bung Fai Paya Nak) are phenomena that appear every year along the Mekong River exactly at the end of three months of the Buddhist Lent. Last year of 2017, it was reported that Buddhist lent started in July 9, 2017 and ended in October 5, 2017, there appeared in total the 772 Naga Fireballs at that night of October 5, 2017. And this year of 2018, the Buddhist Lent will begin in July 28, 2018, it will end in October 24, 2018, and it is expected by the local Buddhist believers that there will be more Naga Fireballs than the last years. The local Buddhists believe that Naga or Big Snakes which inhabited in the Mekong River worship or celebrate monks who observed the three months Buddhist Lent with firing rockets or fireballs from the beneath of Mekong River. Non-local Buddhists are doubtful about the phenomena and opine it in two ways, one is that Laotian soldiers were firing tracer rounds into the air across the river from the festival and another one is that the fireball is a result of flammable phosphine gas generated by the marshy environment. I don't want to judge their solution which one is right or wrong, but will apply Hermeneutics to interpret their views. I believe that Hermeneutics can nourish their dialog with each other for mutual understanding and peaceful living together. For me, the local Buddhists apply the Buddhist Hermeneutics of Apannakadhamma (Phenomenological Approach or Psychological Belief) to understand the Naga Fireballs Phenomena, but the Non-local Buddhists adopt the Hermeneutics of Kalamasutta (10 Principles of Faith or scientific reason). The two Buddhist theories of Hermeneutics correspond to the debate between Gadamer's and Habermas' Hermeneutics.

Keywords

Naga Fireballs, Buddhist Lent, Debate of Gadamer and Habermas, Kalamasutta, Apannakadhamma

INTRODUCTION

My attempt made in this paper is consisted of the following three objectives, (1) to narrate the phenomenal story of Naga fireballs in Northeastern provinces of Thailand, (2) to explain two theories of Buddhist Hermeneutics, namely 'the 10 Reasonings of Faith' (Kalamasutta) and 'Sure Practices' (Apannaka-Dhamma), and apply them to understand the story of Naga Fireballs and (3) to explain the debate between Gadamer's and Habermas' Hermeneutics and apply them to understand the story of Naga Fireballs. My thesis is that "religious and philosophical Hermeneutics can help understanding the religious scriptures containing the stories concerning religious beliefs and can help religious followers co-exist with each other peacefully.

THE PHENOMENAL LEGEND OF NAGA FIREBALLS

The Naga fireballs, also known in Thai as bung fai paya nak or Mekong lights, are a phenomenon said to be often seen on the Mekong River. Glowing balls are alleged to naturally rise from the water high into the air. The balls are said to be reddish and to range in size from smaller sparkles up to the size of basketballs. They quickly rise up to a couple of hundred meters before disappearing. The number of fireballs is sometimes reported varies between tens and thousands per night. The phenomenon is named after the Phaya Naga, legendary serpent-like creatures said to live in the Mekong.

Naga fireballs have been reported over an approximately 250 kilometer long section of Mekong River with the centre of this section approximately at Phon Phisai town in Amphoe Phon Phisai. Balls have also been reported rising from smaller rivers, lakes and ponds in this region. The fireballs are most often reported around the night of Wan Ok Phansa at the end of the Buddhist Lent in late-October every year.

DEBATE OF NAGA FIREBALL BETWEEN LOCAL BUDDHISTS AND NON-LOCAL BUDDHISTS

Although the fireballs are regularly seen on the river during the Phaya Nak festival as it is mentioned in the above passage, there are two arguments trying to explain the phenomena, one is known as "Local Buddhist arguments and another one is 'Non-Local Buddhist Arguments, as follows:

Local Buddhist Arguments:

This phenomenal legend happens in the Northeastern Nong Khai Province of Thailand in every autumn during the month of October exactly on the date marking the end of Buddhist Lent. The local Buddhists organize the Bang Fai Phaya Naak (Naga fireballs") festival in Nong Khai Province in order to celebrate and watch the miraculous and mysterious fireballs, which appear over the Mekong River every year. The local Buddhists further believe that Naga or Big Snakes which inhabited in the Mekong River worship or celebrate monks who observed the three months Buddhist

Lent with firing rockets or fireballs from the beneath of Mekong River. Locals insist they're the work of the Naga, an otherworldly serpent that lurks in the river's murky waters.

Last year of 2017, it was reported that Buddhist lent started in July 9, 2017 and ended in October 5, 2017, there appeared in total the 772 Naga Fireballs at that And this year of 2018, the Buddhist Lent will begin in July 28, 2018, it will end in October 24, 2018, and it is expected by the local Buddhist believers that there will be more Naga Fireballs than the last years.

Non-Local Buddhist Counter-Arguments: It is divided into 2 groups:

First objection: some individuals have attempted to scientifically explain the phenomenon. One explanation is that the fireball is a result of flammable phosphine gas (a colorless foul-smelling gaseous compound of phosphorus and hydrogen, analogous to ammonia, widely used as an insecticidal fumigant in agricultural products) generated by the marshy environment.

But, Dunning, who argued against this view, writes that such fireballs are very unlikely to spontaneously ignite, and would not stay lit when traveling at the speeds the fireballs are seen rising at, and that there is no science that can explain "the Naga Fireballs to be naturally produced burning gas bubbles."

Another one is quite similar explanation with the above mentioned view, which involves a similar phenomenon in plasma physics. A free-floating plasma orb, created when surface electricity is discharged into a solution. However, an observation is that most plasma ball experiments are conducted using high voltage capacitors, microwave oscillators, or microwave ovens, rather than in natural conditions.

Second objection: A 2002 iTV documentary showed Laotian soldiers firing tracer rounds into the air across the river from the festival. It is the view of a Thai biologist Jessada Enduangboripant, who also analyzed footage of a Naga fireball event and concluded that the effect was caused by the firing of flare guns from the other side of the river.

According to Jessada, the fireballs are neither mysterious, nor are they fireballs: they are red flares fired into the night sky from across the river in Laos, for the benefit of Thais picnicking in expectation of a "miracle", which often materializes on cue. How does he know? He asked a friend to film a fireball sighting and sends the footage to him. In the clip, posted on his YouTube channel, even the popping sounds of flares being fired from a gun can be heard just as several rising red dots appear in the sky. "Thai people are very gullible and I feel it's my duty to help foster scientific and critical thinking," Jessada says. "Younger people tend to be quite receptive."

Brian Dunning, a skeptic, supports such a view and suggests that it would be impossible for anyone across the half-mile river to hear a gunshot because it would take 2.5 seconds for the sound to travel to the spectators, and by then the crowd watching would have already noticed the light and started cheering, drowning out the sound when it would reach them.

The ories of Buddhist hermeneutics involved those two

arguments could be supported by the Buddhist Hermeneutics in order to help explain the phenomena. Theories of Buddhist Hermeneutics for Non-Local Buddhists or Outsiders.

According to this group, who does not believe in the phenomena as a miracle, tries to remind that the Buddha did not emphasize on this kind of things, instead, he reminds the Buddhists to not believe even the Buddha himself, but the Dhamma he taught. Buddhism is a religion of reason as the statement in the Tipitaka stating that the Buddhists should cultivate faith accompanied with wisdom (*saddhananasam payutta*). The Hermeneutical theory they propose is known as the "10 Reasons of Faith" (*Kalamasutta*) as illustrated below:

1. Hermeneutics of the 10 Principle of Faith:

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

"Kalamas, you have a right to feel uncertain for you have raised a doubt in a situation in which you ought to suspend your judgment. Come now, Kalamas, do not accept anything only on the grounds of (1) tradition or (2) report or (3) hearsay or (4) because it is an authority of text or (5) because it is logic or (6) because it is inference or (7) because of a superficial assessment of the appearance or (8) because it conforms with one's approved theory or (9) because it is seeming possibility or (10) because of the prestige of your teacher. (11) When you, Kalamas, realize for yourself that these doctrines are evil and unjustified, that they are condemned by the wise and that when they are accepted and lived by, they conduce to ill and sorrow, then you should reject them. (A.I.189)

The above-mentioned ten faiths can be paired with three kinds of wisdom" (*panna*), that is, wisdom resulting from study, wisdom from reflection, and wisdom from mental development, (*D.III.219*). The faith-principles nos. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 10 can be grouped under the wisdom resulting from study, the faith-principles nos. 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 can be classified into the wisdom resulting from reflection, and the last one no. 11 can be categorized into the wisdom derived from the mental development.

The three types of wisdom as quoted above are taken as "gradual path" leading to the realization of Nibbana No.11 is like a conclusion of all the 10 principles, but represents the heart of Buddhist wisdom. According to *Itivuttaka* (*Iti 16-17*), these are, respectively, the most important internal and external factors for attaining the goal of the practice.

The Non-local Buddhists make use of the hermeneutic of the 10 principles of faith to examine all kinds of phenomena by proposing idea that one should not believe only the hearsay, tradition, and so on. This idea corresponds to the view that "Laotian soldiers firing tracer rounds into the air across the river from the festival."

2. The Method of the Four Great Authorities:

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

2.1. The four great authorities for determining Dhamma: These four great indicators are not actually a classification of authorities or means but a list of matters rejected as invalid authorities. The real purpose of the four indicators was to establish the teaching as the true authority. The last two paragraphs are meaningful.

"(1) A monk might say: 'Face to face with the Buddha did I hear this; face to face with him did I receive this. This is the Doctrine, this is the Discipline, this is the Master's teaching. It is called 'The appeal to the Enlightened One as authority'."

"(2) A monk might say: 'I such and such a monastery resides an Order (sangha) together with an elder monk, together with a leader. Face to face with that Order did I hear this; ... It is called 'The appeal to a community of monks or an Order as authority'."

"(3) A monk might say: 'In such and such a monastery reside a great number of elder monks, widely learned, versed in the Collections, experts on the Doctrine, experts on the Discipline, experts on the Summaries. In the presence of those monks did I hear this; ... It is called! 'The appeal to a number of elders as authority'."

"(4) A monk might say: 'In such and such a monastery resides an elder monk of wide learning It is called 'The appeal to a single elder as authority'. 'The words of that monk are neither to be welcomed nor scorned, the words and syllables thereof are to be studied thoroughly, laid beside the Discourses and compared with the Discipline. 'If, when laid beside the Discourses and compared with the Discipline, these words, and syllables lie not along with the Discourses and agree not with the Discipline then you may come to the conclusion: Surely this is not the word of the Buddha, and it has been wrongly grasped by that monk. Then reject it, (D.II. 123; A.II.167).'"

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

"(1) What has not been considered inappropriate is inappropriate if it resembles what is inappropriate. For example: Riding a bicycle is not prohibited for monks by their discipline; but it resembles what is not appropriate (asamvara) for monks; hence it is taken as inappropriate." "(2) What has not been considered inappropriate is appropriate if it resembles what is appropriate. For example: A cup of tea in the afternoon has not been prohibited as inappropriate, but resembles what is appropriate; hence it is appropriate." "(3) What has not been considered appropriate is inappropriate if it resembles what is inappropriate. For example: Wearing a wrist-watch

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

How can we link the above mentioned doctrine to this particular phenomenon of Naga Fireballs? We can do that by this way: even though the Buddha did not mention that we should not have faith on the Naga Fireball phenomena, but, according to Non-Local Buddhists, we can use the first of the four great authorities to judge this phenomena as 'inappropriate'.

THEORIES OF BUDDHIST HERMENEUTICS FOR LOCAL BUDDHISTS OR INSIDERS

1. The Method of Four Assurances

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

"If there is a world beyond, and there is the fruit and result of kamma well-done or ill, then when the body breaks up after death, I shall arise in a happy born, in a heaven world." *"If, however, there is no world beyond, no fruit and result of kamma well-done or ill, yet in this very life I dwell free from hostility and affliction, sorrow-less and happy."* *"Again, even if having done evil kamma and it is effective in producing a result, nevertheless (new) I do not think to do evil towards everyone, so how can ill touch me?"* *"Again, if not having done evil and it is not effective (producing no result) then in both ways I hold myself utterly pure."* (A.1.189)

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

The benefit of this doctrine is that if we believe in the Naga Fireballs, then we practice the Buddha's teachings, then our lives will be good, and if.

2. The Method of Apannaka or Sure Practice

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

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

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

“(According to the folk-lore) it is possible that the Buddha visited Thailand.” “(In the opinion of those who deny folk-lore) it is also possible that the Buddha did not.” “We pay homage to Sripada (the Buddha's footprints) with the belief that the Buddha visited Thailand.” “If the Buddha had visited Thailand in actuality we would gain 'merit'. 'If the opposite was true and the Buddha did not visit Thailand still the religious practice motivated by the belief would result in both generating 'merit' and spreading a good name for us.” “In this manner, we gain irrespective of the factuality of the belief that the Buddha visited Thailand.” “In this manner, an intelligent person would conclude that it is right to pay homage to the Buddha whether he visited Thailand or not.”

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

THE GADAMER-HABERMAS DEBATE

Introduction: In the framework of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, when both of whom see an importance of stepping into a dialogical event to fulfill the right understanding, both Gadamer and Habermas agree that an interpreter always prejudices' something according to one own tradition'. Through this 'prejudging', one always 'rationalizes' something in a way that belongs to one own 'tradition or a historical horizon' in which one stands. Therefore, the reality of what one interprets will be changed and different from the previous context, because one cannot really enter into the other historical horizon' which is unfamiliar one, that is the world one tries to understand.

The Debate on the World and Language:

The ideas of 'world and language of Habermas differ from Gadamer. In dialog, interpreters will enter into a world or atmosphere which is rich, irreducible, multifaceted, boundless and meaningful and functions to open up every possible insight by projecting itself to us (as participants) through 'language' (Gadamer, 2001).

For Gadamer, 'language as a living being in the world, not as 'a thing in the world' is thus a medium between the Tor an interpreter and the world' or the other historical horizon. In other word, 'language' is not just a particular 'socio-political artifact' but a 'living being in the world'. And we cannot manipulate the world', but we can only participate in it, and always be part of it. For Gadamer, the world and the language have life.

In contrast to Habermas, the world is what we can manipulate or master it, and language is a mere things, tools or symbolic expression, not a living being in the world. For Habermas, the world and the language have no life. Moreover, for Gadamer, aesthetic, linguistic, tradition and history are living being or expressions of living things. For Habermas, all those things are nonliving beings, so, we need to employ non-living language, which is outside the non-living world, as a means to understand the living world and its true nature or universal truth.

For Gadamer, we can never understand the universal truth of the world, because we are always part of the living world. For Habermas, we can reach the universal truth of the world, because we are outside of the world. So, for Habermas, our

culture, religion and tradition to which we belong are not still the truth out there in the non-living world, but this belongingness is merely one sort of prejudice, which we need to step out of it. While, Gadamer's project is to elucidate the best possible meanings from the world, Habermas's project is to manipulate the non-living world in order to reveal the social truth of it.

AN APPLICATION OF THE DEBATE BETWEEN GADAMER'S AND HABERMAS HERMENEUTICS TO A BUDDHIST STUDY OF NAGA FIREBALLS OR MEKONG LIGHTS (BUNG FAI PAYA NAK)

The Theory of 10 Reasons of Faith' (Kalamasutta), which is more scientific, is comparable to the Habermas' Theory of Emancipatory interest in the sense of reflection and criticism of ideology, while the "Theory of Sure Practice' (Apannakadhamma), which is more psychological, is to Gadamer's theory. The local Buddhists, who use and practice the "sure practice theory' (Apannakadhamma) and Gadamer's theory perceive the phenomena of 'Fire Balls' as a living phenomenal language and world. The local Buddhists try to maintain and propagate the festival not only for spiritual development but also for mutual understanding between Thai people and Laotian people. The local Buddhists including Laotian people, who are mostly Buddhists think that this Naga Fireballs help promote good relationship between Thai people especially in the Northeastern provinces, such as Nong Kai province and Laotian people. This is in trend with AEC culture. However, the Non-Local Buddhists or outsiders, who apply the '10 Reasons of Faith' (Kalamasuttadhamma) or Habermas' Theory and take side with Jessada, who thinks that the Naga Fireballs are nothing but the Laotian Soldiers firing tracer round into the air, they are of the opinion that such a belief is not that the Buddha mencu.

Gadamer's theories of "Fusion of Horizon" and "Hermeneutical Dialectic" will help us understand the phenomena. The legend of Naga Fireballs can fuse my knowledge of Naga in Buddhism with this Naga Fireball. In the Buddha's time, there was a Naga or big snake, who wanted to be a monk, came in the guise of a man with white robe and asked permission from a senior monk to be ordained and he got an ordination finally, but in the night, while he was in sleeping, his gender changed from monk to be the snake again. When the truth was revealed to the public, he could not remain as a monk anymore, but he asked for one blessing that his name 'Naga' (snake) should be used for a man who would like to be ordained as a monk, the monk would-be should be called Naga before being given a monkhood from the preceptor. This is tradition or pre-understanding that could be traced from the text, for which Gadamer's theory can be applicable as fusion of horizon. It could be understood in the light of hermeneutical dialectic too by starting from (1) understanding a text, (2) explaining or interpreting it, and then (3) applying it, (Stiver, 1996, p.94), which is different from Habermas' hermeneutical dialectic, consisting of (1) explaining a text, (2) interpreting it, and then (3) criticizing it. Habermas stated. that Gadamer was too wedded to the tradition so that he was left to the prejudices.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Gadamer-Habermas debate to frame the study of the Naga Fireballs, I have shown that Gadamer, which is similar to 'true practice theory of Buddhism', empowers the subjectivity of experiences, so the religious significance of Naga Fireballs is disclosed, and this can be seen as questioning and transcending Habermas' hermeneutics and the Non-Local Buddhists or outsiders. Despite some of the similarities that exist between Gadamer and Habermas, they remain essentially unlike. Habermas, on the one hand, retains the knowing subject of the idealist tradition who actively appropriates the world and judges it, freeing himself from coercion through the power of reason. Gadamer, on the other hand, grants us the active. Knowing subject, but then grounds him in language, tradition and experience, and his openness to experience, whereby he is receptive to the claim to truth of tradition and the partner in dialogue. He is ultimately successful in this debate because this idea allows him to account for both our sense of autonomy in criticizing tradition and our experience finitude.

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