

# An Analytical Study of Development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai Society

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## Abstract

The Objectives of this Dissertation are to study the background and the main contents of Tebhūmikathā, the development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society, to analyze the knowledge development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society of each period by three steps of methodology, namely collecting data, studying data and analyzing data.

The findings indicated that the word “Tebhūmikathā” or “Traibhum” means three realms or three worlds, namely [1] *Kāmabhūmi* (Sensuous realm), [2] *Rūpabhūmi* (Form realm) and [3] *Arūpabhūmi* (Formless realm), it has thirty-one worlds in details. Tebhūmikathā was divided into eleven parts; the last part refers to the Nibbana and the Path.

For the issue of development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society, it was seen that it was practically applied and virtually developed to Thai society in various dimensions, namely, Buddhist arts as architectures, sculptures and paintings, political ideas, ethics and morality, and the concept of cosmology. From the past to the present (Sokhothai to Rattanakosin period), Tebhūmikathā is well known and widespread throughout Thai society. It makes a great importance in the development of Thai religious thought and practice. The knowledge of Tebhūmikathā was applied to Thai society from generation to generation in various ways, for example, Thai Buddhist arts, political ideas, principle of Ethics and morality cosmological concept. Even today this will be less influenced, but it still appears in religious arts and royal cremation ceremony, has an influence on the knowledge development of Tebhūmikathā, it has been believed that Sumeru mountain is the center of universe.

**Keywords:** Tebhūmikathā (Traibhum), PhramahaDhammarājā  
(King Lithai), Thai Society

## Introduction

The scripture named "Tebhūmikathā" is one of the oldest traditional works of Thai Buddhist literature. It was written by King Lithai in Sukhothai period (1239-1277). Tebhūmikathā consists of three different worlds or planes of existence and their respective mythical inhabitants and creatures.

Although the time had passed for more than 600 years, the idea of the Three Worlds is still having the influence over the people in term of their living existence and has been hidden inside the belief and faith of Buddhist people through the underline media in the form of Lanna architectural Buddhism or temples in the northern part of Thailand which can be seen in the form of building drawing plan, including the detailed composition of the decoration inside and outside of the buildings in connection with the motto of the Three Worlds, the Universe, narrating about the three Worlds consisting of; 1) Sensual sphere where the human beings, unhuman beings and animals are living, 2) Fine material sphere, the living place of the formed celestial beings or Brahma, and 3) The immaterial sphere, the living place of the formless Brahma or celestial beings. Each world contains the complicated details hidden by the senses of status and forms of each World containing human beings, unhuman beings, animals, Brahma, celestial beings, trees and environment of each world.<sup>1</sup>

All of the many realms which together make up the cosmos are also described, along with the inhabitants of each of those realms. The sermon also includes a concise and specific description of the path to perfection mapped out for humanity by the Buddha. All of this, and much more that is to be found in the Trai Phum Phra Ruang, have made the text one of great importance in the development of Thai religious thought, and it has served as an important source of literary and artistic inspiration. It would be difficult to understand the significance of the text, or the usefulness of a translation of it for those interested in Thai or Theravada Buddhist studies.<sup>2</sup>

Tebhūmikathā contains various details of Buddhist teachings and influences to Thai society in many conditions, some of the content in the Tebhūmikathā is used

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<sup>1</sup> Chananchida yuktirat, **Journal of Art and Design**, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University : pp. 48-62.

<sup>2</sup> Frank E. Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds. Berkeley, cited in "The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies" edited by A. K. Narain, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA., Volume 5 Number 2 (1982): p.132.

as a development for Thai society in important religious works, for example, Buddhist arts, political ideas, ethics and morality, and cosmological concepts in Buddhism. Tebhūmikathā or Traibhumi Phra Ruang is well known and widespread throughout Thai society. It has been applied as a great importance in the development of Thai religious thought, and it has served as an important source of literary and artistic inspiration. That is why the writer is interested in doing this dissertation.

### The main sources and contents of Tebhūmikathā

The main sources of Tebhūmikathā are from many Buddhist scriptures, both primary sources and secondary sources, numbers of them are about thirty-three books which consist of the Tipitaka, Atthakathā, Tikā, and Anutikā,<sup>3</sup> including other Buddhist scriptures. That is because Tebhūmikathā contains various details of Buddhism.

Tebhūmikathā has the big structure of contents, that is because although the term "Traibhumi" means Three world, there are thirty-three worlds of existences in details. They are;

Tebhūmi 3 ( 31)		
<b>1. Kāmabhūmi</b> (11)	<b>2. Rūpabhūmi</b> (16)	<b>3. Arūpabhūmi</b> (4)

#### 1. Kāmabhūmi (the sensuous world) 11 (1-11)

1) Narakabhūmi (Land of Hell). It is a territory of unimaginable suffering and anguish.

2) Tiracchānabhūmi (Land of Animals). This territory is living place of animals.

3) Petabhūmi (Land of hungry Ghosts or Shades). Ghosts and unhappy spirits wander hopelessly in this land.

4) Asurakayabhūmi (Land of Demons). Demons or Titans are engaged in relentless conflict with each other in this land.

*(These territories are called as Apayabhūmi 4 (States of Deprivation). Full name of the four above realms is Kāmaduggatibhūmi)*

5) Manussabhūmi (Land of Human Beings). This land contains of unique balance of pleasure and pain; it facilitates the development of virtue and wisdom to the degree necessary to set one free from the entire cycle of rebirths.

<sup>3</sup> Prof., Dr. Niyada Lausoonthorn, Study of Source of TribhumPraruang, Maekhampang publishing.B.E. 2538.

6) Catumahārājikadevabhūmi (Land of Devas of the Four Great Kings). Place of the gandhabbas (dancers), the celestial musicians, and the yakkhas, tree spirits of varying degrees of ethical purity.

7) Tāvātimsadevabhūmi (Land of the Thirty-three Gods). Leader of Devas named Sakka, he is a devotee of the Buddha, presides over this realm. Many devas dwelling here live in mansions in the air.

8) Yāmadevabhūmi (Land of yāma devas). These devas live in the air, free of all difficulties.

9) Tusitādevabhūmi (Land of contented devas). A realm of pure delight and gaiety. Bodhisattas abide here prior to their final human birth. This is where the bodhisatta Maitreya, the next Buddha, is said to dwell.

10) Nimmānaratidevabhūmi (Land of Devas Delighting in Creation). These devas delight in the sense objects of their own creation.

11) Paranimmita-vasavattidevabhūmi (Land of Devas Wielding Power over the Creation of others). These devas enjoy sense pleasures created by others for them. Māra, the personification of delusion and desire, lives here.

*(Full name of the seven above realms is **Kāmasugatībhūmi**)*

## **2. Rūpabhūmi (The Fine-Material World) 16 (12-27)**

12) Brahma-parisajjadevabhūmi (Land of retinue of Brahma). Devas in this territory enjoy the minor degree of the first.

13) Brahma-purohitadevabhūmi (Land of Ministers of Brahma). Devas in this territory enjoy the medium degree of the first jhanic bliss.

14) Mahābrahmabhūmi (Land of Great Brahmas). The land of powerful and magical great Brahmas. Theirs delusion lead them to regard themselves as the all-powerful, all-seeing creator of the universe.

15) Parittābhādevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Limited Radiance). Devas in this territory enjoy the minor degree of the second jhanic bliss.

16) Appamānabhādevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Unbounded Radiance). Devas in this territory enjoy the medium degree of the second jhanic bliss.

17) Ābhassaradevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Streaming Radiance). Devas in this territory enjoy the highest degree of the second jhanic bliss.

18) Parittasubhādevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Limited Glory). Devas in this territory enjoy minor degree of the third jhanic bliss.

19) Appamānasubhādevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Unbounded Glory). Devas in this territory enjoy the medium degree of the third jhanic bliss.

20) Subhakinnādevabhūmi (Land of Devas of Refulgent Glory). Devas in this territory enjoy the highest degree of the third jhanic bliss.

21) Vehapphalādevabhūmi (Land of very fruitful Devas). Devas in this territory enjoy the minor degree of the fourth jhanic bliss.

22) Asaññasattabhūmi (Land of unconscious beings). Only body is present; no mind.

23) Avihādevabhūmi (Land of Devas not Falling Away).

24) Atappādevabhūmi (Land of Untroubled devas).

25) Sudassādevabhūmi (Land of beautiful devas).

26) Sudassidevabhūmi (Land of Clear-sighted devas).

27) Akanitthādevabhūmi (Land of Peerless devas).

*(From 23-27 bhūmis, These are the five pure territories (suddhāvāsa), which are accessible only to non-returners (anāgāmi) and arahants. Beings who become non-returners in other realms are reborn here, where they attain arahantship. Among its inhabitants is Brahma Sahampati, who begs the Buddha to teach Dhamma to the world)*

### 3. Arūpabhūmi (The Immaterial World) 4 (28-31)

28) Ākāśānañcāyatanadevabhūmi (Land of Infinite Space).

29) Viññānañcāyatanadeva-bhūmi (Land of Infinite Consciousness).

30) Akiñcaññāyatanadeva-bhūmi (Land of Nothingness).

31) Nevasaññānāsaññāyatanadevabhūmi (Land of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception).

*(Devas in these territories are possessed entirely of mind. Having no physical body, they are unable to hear Buddhist teachings)*

In the scripture, Tebhūmikathā is divided into 11 parts as follows:-

Part 1 Bhūmi of the hell Beings (bhūmi 1). It explains about characteristics of hell beings, the cause of birth in the hell, kinds and numbers of the hells, including living conditions in the hell.

Part 2 Bhūmi of the Animals (bhūmi 2). It clarifies about territories of the animals, four kinds of birth in this realm, various kinds of animal beings.

Part 3 Bhūmi of the suffering Ghosts (bhūmi 3). It expounds about territory of hungry ghosts, dwelling places and living conditions of hungry ghosts.

Part 4 Bhūmi of the Asura (bhūmi 4). It gives details of territory of the Asura, characteristics and living conditions of Asura beings.

Part 5 Bhūmi of human beings (bhūmi 5). It illustrates the characteristics of human beings in various aspects. For examples, the process of birth from the womb, type of human beings in various dimensions, inhabitants of the four continents, the great Emperor, King Asoka as a model of Cakkavatti, Jotika millionaire, wholesome actions, four kinds of birth and four causes of death.

Part 6 Bhūmi of six Devas (bhūmi 6-11). It indicates the six levels of Devas who are born in territories of sensual desire.

Part 7 Bhūmi of sixteen formal Devas or Brahmas /material factors (bhūmi 12-27). It mentions characteristics and living conditions of Brahma beings in sixteen territories of material factors.

Part 8 Bhūmi of four formless Devas or Brahmas /immaterial factors (bhūmi 28-31). It talks about living conditions and characteristics of sour formless brahmas who are born in the immaterial world.

Part 9 Avinibhogarupa (Mahabhūtarupa 4 + Upādānarupa 4 = 8). It demonstrates the impermanent of all beings in three worlds, characteristics of Sumerumountain as the center of universe.

Part 10 Destruction and Renewal of the world. This chapter refers to conditions and causes of destruction and birth of the world.

Part 11 Nibbāna and the Path. The last chapter describes about value of Nibbana and the paths of attaining of Nibbana wich is the highest goal of Buddhism.

### **Development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society**

The contents of Tebhūmikathā contain various details of Buddhist teachings and have influences on Thai society in many conditions, some of the content in the Tebhūmikathā is used as a development for Thai society in important religious works, for example Buddhist Arts, Political Ideas, Ethics and Morality and cosmological concepts in Buddhism. Tebhūmikathā or Trai Bhum Pra Ruang is well known and widespread throughout Thai society. It makes a great importance in the development of Thai religious thought, and it has served as an important source of literary and artistic inspiration.

Development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai Society appears in Buddhist Arts, Political Ideas, Ethics and morality, and Buddhist cosmology. There is a conclusion as follows;

Buddhist arts which are developed by Tebhūmikathā consist of Buddhist architecture, Buddhist sculpture, and Buddhist painting. It includes art media which depict Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other entities; notable Buddhist figures, both historical and mythical; narrative scenes from the lives of all of these; mandalas and other graphic aids to practice; as well as physical objects associated with Buddhist practice, such as vajras, bells, stupas and Buddhist temple architecture.<sup>4</sup>

We can see Buddhist architecture in construction of buildings in many Thai Buddhist temples, for example Kuti (cubicle), vihara (sanctuary), and Sala (Multipurpose pavilion) etc. They have been influenced by Tebhūmikathā. For Buddhist sculptures, it is about creation of the Buddha image or carving stones with the Buddha's image, including various images of animals indicated in Tebhūmikathā, for example Deva's images, garuda's images and Lion's images etc. Sculpture is the art of making two- or three-dimensional representative or abstract forms, especially by carving stone or wood or by casting metal or plaster<sup>5</sup>. lastly, we can see Buddhist painting from the Buddhist wall, Buddhist chapel which painted the pictures concerned with the hell or heaven, Himalaya forest, and Sumeru mountain etc. In general, we can see Buddhist arts from the buildings of grand palace, construction of merumas mountain for the Royal Cremation Ceremony or Lanna Buddhist Arts etc.

Political ideas, which appeared in Tebhūmikathā, focus on the qualifications of the ruler. The ruler should be a Dhammaraja or Cakkavatti who has three qualifications; namely qualification of wisdom, qualifications of purity, and qualification of compassion. And the ruler must have ten virtues called "Dasavitha Rajadhamma", i.e. charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self controlling, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and uprightness. The dasavithadhamma is the key principle in the use of the authority of the king. It is not only for the king, but it can be applied for all the people who use the power to govern. An impact of Theravada Buddhism on administration has been inherited on society's morality, political culture since Sukothai period, unfortunately, part of such inheritances have been ignored thus the question arises whether "Norms" and "Values" of the present society have been changed or not.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Ciliberto. Buddhist Art News, [Online], Available: <https://buddhistartnews.wordpress.com/what-is-buddhist-art/>[14 March 2017]

<sup>5</sup> Oxford University. Oxford Living Dictionaries, [Online], Available: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sculpture> [20 December 2017]

<sup>6</sup> PhraSrisudhammethi (Suthep Pussadhammo), Theravada Buddhism's Influence on the King Lithai's Idea of Politics and Government: A Case Study of Traibhumikatha, Master Thesis of MCU. B.E. 2536.

Development of Buddhist ethics and morality can be seen in general contents of Tebhūmikathā. That is because Dhamma in Tebhūmikathā is a set of the framework for conduct to keep the people peaceful. There are many Buddhist ethics and morality in Tebhūmikathā, for example, paying respect to the triple gems (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), and keeping Sila (it will embrace a commitment to harmony and self-restraint with the principal motivation being non-violence). The principle of kamma and rebirth is the important instrument for controlling ones in the good way of life. That is because when the people believe in law of kamma and rebirth, they will try to do good actions in order to achieve good fruits and to be reborn in good realms (heaven), and they will not do bad things which will bring bad fruits to them and will be born in bad realms (hell) in the future. In addition, the main teachings in Buddhism are considered as ethics and morality, that is because when the people understand and practice them rightly, they will improve and develop themselves in order to attain higher qualifications.

Cosmology is the study of the nature and origin of the universe<sup>7</sup>. For the concept of development of Tebhūmikathā to Buddhist cosmology, it is the idea that Sumeru mountain is the center of the universe. According to the principle of Buddhist cosmology, there are four realms of Arūpabhūmi brahmas at the top of the universe, sixteen realms of Rūpabhūmis brahmas below them, and then it is the realm of desire devas, human beings, animal, asura, hungry ghosts, and hells. It is explained in Tebhūmikathā that Sumeru is the great mountain above the mountains, lies at the center of the universe, it is surrounded by seven concentric mountain rings, revolves the sun, the moon, the planets and the continents of the earth.

For some example of Buddhist architecture and paintings appearing in royal ceremony. Structure of Pramerumas as model of Traibhum.

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<sup>7</sup> Cambridge University. Cambridge Dictionary, [Online], Available: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cosmology>. [ 24 December 2017]



Figure : Shows map of Pramarumas in Royal Crematorium<sup>8</sup>

### Analysis on the Knowledge Development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai Society

From Sukhothai to Rattanakosin period, Tebhūmikathā or Traibhumpraruang is well known, and play a significant role in creation of a religious literature, tradition, faith, belief, arts, political ideas, ethics and morality, and cosmological concept in Thai society. However, in this modern society, there are many changes, some of the Traibhum was criticized and analyzed by later scholars who are more influenced by scientific thought, and some of Traibhum such as 31 planes is described as a mental development or status of mind. In the reign of King Rama I, he ordered to make Traibhumvinicchaya (a book criticizes traibhum) to improve and apply the contents of Traibhum for modern Thai society.

For the Analysis of knowledge Development of Tebhūmikathā to Thai society, it was found that Traibhum is an important piece of Buddhist literature developed the belief and thinking of the Thai people for a long time. It was written by PhyaLithai, King of Sukhothai kingdom. The essence of the Trai Bhum Pra ruang is to propose the structure of cosmology. The axis of the mountain will fall into the Sithundorn sea. Surrounding of the mountain is composed of 3 main realms (Bhūmis), i.e. Kāmabhūmi, Rūpabhūmi and Arūpabhūmi. These realms are surrounded by the mountain in the hierarchy.

<sup>8</sup> Vision Thai. Royal Crematorium, [Online], Available: <http://vision-thai.net/article/royal-crematorium/>[15 March 2018]

The contents of Tebhūmikathā was developed in Thai society in various way, namely, Thai Buddhist arts (especially architectures and paintings), Thai political Ideas, ethics and morality, and the concept of Cosmology in Thai society.

### **1. Thai Buddhist arts**

Tebhūmikathā was developed to Thai Buddhist arts in all branches (architecture, sculptures and Painting). After the Sukhothai period, Thai Buddhist arts have been continuously developed by generation to generation, i.e. Buddhist arts in Lanna period, Buddhist arts in Ayutthya period, Buddhist arts in Thonburi period, Buddhist arts in Rattanakosin period.

1.1 In Lanna period (C.E. 1292 - 1775), the development of Tebhūmikathā leads to create Lanna Buddhist arts according to a belief from Traibhum. There are many temples in the northern part of Thailand, which were developed by motivation of the contents of Traibhum, for example, Wat Phrasingh, Wat Chedi Luang, and Wat Ton Kwen in Chiangmai city, Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, Wat Lai Hin Luang, Wat Pong Sanuk in Lampang city. These temples have been designed according to the contents of the Traibhum that the Sumeru Mountain is the center of universe

1.2 In Ayutthya period (C.E. 1351 -1767), there is a great discovery of Traibhum (Ayutthaya edition) in the National Library of Paris's Version, France. That changed some Buddhist scholars' mind that Tebhūmikathā or Traibhum was not written in Sokhothai period, it was a religious literature in Ayutthaya period. However, some content of Ayutthaya Traibhum version was different from Sukhothai version. It is a blend of Buddhism and Brahmanism, which connects between the contents of Traibhum and Ramakian.

1.3 In Thonburi period (C.E. 1767–1782), even for a short period of time, but there are picture books of Traibhum which was inherited from the Ayutthaya period. Full perfect pictures of ThonburiTraibhum version were found at the Museum of Asian Art (German: Museum fürAsiatischeKunst) is located in the Dahlem neighborhood of the borough of Steglitz-Zehlendorf, Berlin, Germany. These picture books of Traibhum are one of a large picture book of Thailand. It has a length of 24-72 meters. Dozens of pictures, which appear in this picture book, are very beautiful and valuable.

1.4 In Rattanakosin period (1782–current), at the reign of King Rama1, he ordered to compose the book named "Traibhumilokavinicchayakathā" to improve

and develop of the contents of Tebhūmikathā or Traibhumipraruang for modern Thai society in the way that it can be applied in daily life. Traibhumilokavinicchayakathā has eight chapters, and aims to explain the Buddha's grace in the section of “Lokavidu” (knower of the world). For the issues of Buddhist arts in Rattanakosin period, we can find that there are many Thai Buddhist arts, (architectures, sculptures and paintings), appeared in many temples of Thailand, which were constructed by the concept of Traibhum cosmology, such as Golden mountain of Wat saket, structure and paintings of Wat Suthat, the structure of the world and the universe according to the Buddhist belief appeared in Traibhum picture book (Ayutthaya edition) of Wat Prachetupon etc. these reflect development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society.

## **2. Thai political Ideas**

For development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai political ideas, there are a lot of arguments about political ideas, and there are many issues to be analyzed. Many scholars criticized political issues in different dimensions (both good side and bad side). In the good side, Phrayalithai composed this religious literature in order to teach and propagate the Dhamma to people. He governed people by the Dhamma, not by law. By this way, he can control people by without weapons. His goal is to make people following good way for achieving good fruits.

In the bad side; some scholars criticized that Phrayalithai composed this literature in order to support his power or government. By this way, he can control people following him, and make the ruler or raja higher than common people. It promotes and makes the status of the king as a holy ruler.

## **3. Thai Buddhist ethics and morality**

For the knowledge development of Tebhūmikathā to Thai Buddhist ethical and moral principles, it was found that the principle of ethics and morality in Tebhūmikathā was developed as a guideline for all Thai people, both the ruler and the ruled, all ages of times, from Sukhothai to Rattanakosin. It has a role in controlling the behavior of people in a good way, i.e. the kings as the rulers must be Dhammaraja, so they practice Dasavitha Rajadhamma, and the people must be good citizen, so they practice the five precepts or act ten meritorious actions. In conclusion, there is use of principle of ethics and morality of Tebhūmikathā in order to govern Thai society before the law.

#### 4. Concept of cosmology in Thai society

The development of the concept of cosmology, appearing in Traibhum, has spread throughout the Thai society in all time of ages, from Sukhothai to Rattanakosin. It influenced to Thais belief and thought, and resulted to create the arts, architecture, painting, including Thai tradition according to the content of Traibhum. There are many Thai temples constructed by the concept of cosmology in Traibhum as it was previously mentioned.

#### Conclusion

Tebhūmikathā or Traibhum means three realms or three worlds, namely [1] *Kāmahūmi* (Sensuous realm), [2] *Rūpabhūmi* (Form realm) and [3] *Arūpabhūmi* (Formless realm), but it has thirty-one worlds in details. Tebhūmikathā was divided into eleven parts; the last part refers to the Nibbana and its Path.

Development of Tebhūmikathā in Thai society was seen that it was practically applied and virtually developed to Thai society in various dimensions, namely, Buddhist arts as architectures, sculptures and paintings, political ideas, ethics and morality, and the concept of cosmology. From the past to the present, Tebhūmikathā is well known and widespread throughout Thai society. It makes a great importance in the development of Thai religious thought and practice. The knowledge of Tebhūmikathā was applied to Thai society from generation to generation in various ways, for example, Thai Buddhist arts, political ideas, principle of ethics and morality cosmological concept. Even today this will be less influenced, but it still appears in religious arts and royal cremation ceremony.

#### Suggestions

##### 1. *Suggestions on Thai Buddhist Arts*

In Thai Buddhist Arts, Tebhūmikathā is important to create Thai Buddhist arts in many respects. These should be preserved and studied the way to be applied to modern concepts.

##### 2. *Suggestions on Political Ideas*

Dhamma in Tebhūmikathā can be used and applied in the real world. It should be beneficial to all levels of people, both the ruler and general people. By this way, the society will be peaceful, humane, and sympathetic.

### 3. *Suggestions on Ethics and morality*

There are the principles of ethics and morality in Tebhūmikathā in order to control the behavior of ruler and citizen in a good way, i.e. Dasavitha Rajadhamma for the ruler and five precepts for citizen. This way should be taken seriously.

### 4. *Suggestions on the concept of cosmology*

Although the concept of cosmology in Tebhūmikathā is not consistent with modern science, but it can be used to create Thai Buddhist arts. So it should be supported continuously.

### 5. *Suggestions on general way*

The contents of Tebhūmikathā are useful in various dimensions. There should be studied correctly and clearly in order to be used in appropriate conditions.

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