

Buddhist Deconstruction in Practice: A reflection on Luangpho Chah's Dismantling of the Binary

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The Dhamma Path is to keep walking forward. But the true Dhamma has no going forward, no going backward, and no standing still. *Luangpho Chah*

Introduction

At the surface level there appears no direct point of convergence between derridean deconstruction and the teachings of Luangpho Chah (Phra Bodhiñâna Thera), one of the foremost meditation masters from the Thai forest tradition. Buddhism and contemporary western deconstruction are historically and geographically far apart from each other. Buddhism emerged as a religion in India more than 2500 years ago from the teachings of the Buddha; whereas, deconstruction, which originated from the writings of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, is a philosophical movement that has a history of roughly four decades. Deconstruction is often dated to 1966 – the year in which Derrida read a paper called 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences' at a conference on structuralism at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Buddhism and deconstruction focus on different areas of enquiry and have distinct agendas. As a religion, Buddhism points out to a specific way of life that is basically centered upon individual understanding of the Four Noble Truths – the Truth of suffering, origin of suffering, cessation of suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the extinction of suffering. Buddhism thus involves *practice*, a way of living, or useful application in real life, quite unlike philosophy which is primarily concerned with *rational investigation* and an attempt at trying to arrive at the truth or validity of a discourse through logical argumentation alone while remaining nonchalant to the fact whether the philosopher himself/herself leads a moral, an immoral or an amoral life at the personal level. Taking this point into consideration, the scholar-monk, Ven. P.A. Payutto, strongly emphasizes in one of

The *second*, and even more radical step is to make the binary redundant by “thinking it through”. The second step will help prepare the ground for analyzing the conditions of possibility for that binary so as to get it displaced. If there is no displacement but mere reversal then there exist the perils of repeating the original imbalance – earlier structure with a negative notation. It merely puts a mark of negation onto something that was valued earlier. Such a naive kind of reversal is to the previous order of domination what negative theology is to theology as Aniket Jaware puts it humorously “the worshippers of the Devil make the Devil into their God...and thus end up with a God after all”³. What needs to be done is to *neutralize* the binary, not merely negate or reverse it. To this extent, deconstruction as a method of philosophizing and ‘reading’ of any text is extremely bold and radical since it helps to generate momentum and critical questioning of dualistic hierarchies.

Buddhism and deconstruction

Buddhism in its core essence is a conscious and rigorous deconstructive practice that places the whole of our being and existence both in the physical/material and mental/spiritual sphere under erasure. This is possible because Buddhism is an atheistic religion and views life as impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattâ*).

The following entities are not opposing conditions or dualistic hierarchies, but desired progression to higher levels of truth and spiritual understanding.

worldly life	→	renunciation
faith	→	rationalization
rationalization	→	non-attachment
self	→	non-self

Ideally, worldly life should progress towards selfless renunciation (or monastic life), faith or devotion should deepen with a rational understanding and not directed to orthodoxy or blind adherence and rationalization should progress to

³ Jaware, Aniket. (2001). **Simplifications**, New Delhi: Orient Longman Lt, p. 435.

non-attachment/non-clinging even to one's own faith⁴ since there is no self (*attâ*) that is absolute or ever-lasting. Buddhism looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self or essence in all things and so the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) that has influenced and directed western thinking down the centuries has a reverse call in Buddhism – I think, therefore I am NOT.⁵ After his enlightenment, the Buddha still had physical ills, had feelings of pain and pleasure, had memories, thoughts, and consciousness. But he did not cling to them as being self, as being me or mine. He knew them as they were, and the one who knew was also not I, not self.

Looked at from the contemporary deconstructive perspective, the Buddha appears to be a mega-deconstructionist. In the *Kalama Sutra*, the Buddha said, "...do not be laid by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: 'this is our teacher'. But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome (*akusala*), and wrong, and bad, then give them up...And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome (*kusala*) and good, then accept them and follow them."⁶

From this saying it is very clear that the Buddha urged his lay followers to use reason and not mere faith on any authority – religious text, teacher, tradition etc while trying to follow his teachings. Buddha's stance is deconstructive in so far as it does not place absolute power/authority on the text, tradition and teacher and renders the action of faith a democratic garb by making it depend on the free will of the believer and his or her rationalization of the process. The Buddha went even further. He told the *bhikkhus* that a disciple should examine even the

⁴ The Buddha cited the famous simile of the *raft* while teaching his followers not to cling even to his teachings. The teaching is compared to a raft for crossing over, and not for getting hold of and carrying on one's back.

⁵ Mahanta, Dipti. (2010). "**The Isan forest meditation tradition: A praxis of mental well-being vis-à-vis global recovery**", *UNDV Conference Volume*, Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, p.589.

⁶ As quoted in Rahula, W. (1990). **What the Buddha Taught**, Bangkok: Haw Trai Foundation, pp.2-3.

Tathâgata (Buddha) himself, so that he (the disciple) might be fully convinced of the true value of the teacher whom he followed.⁷ The dialectics of deconstruction also underlay Buddha's rejection of the hierarchical caste system that had a powerful grip on traditional Hindu society, his *re*-interpretation of the term *brahman*, the Vedic tradition of worshipping the six directions, etc.

Luangpho Chah as a sincere and diligent follower of the Buddha worked very much within the framework of a form of deconstruction that we may as well name as empirical deconstruction. Just like his predecessors, Luangpoo Mun, Luangpoo Sao, and others, Luangpho Chah's emphasis on the *thudhong*⁸ practice geared his deconstructive endeavor to none other than the dawning of an inner peaceful state upon the transcendence of – the ego, conventional truths, mental-formations and attachment to all mental states. His numerous dhamma talks attest to the truth that he developed and adhered to a life's philosophy that was based on a rigorous deconstructive mode of practice that gave rise to a practical discourse of annihilation of the ego and the resultant understanding of any state of 'being' (both mental and physical) as it-is-in-itself. This mode of practice can thus be categorized as empirical deconstruction or deconstruction-in-praxis. Such a way of practice does not valorize the 'written' text, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb without at the same time erecting a 'mega-narrative' of the self-at-practice. This is possible because critically reflective Buddhist deconstruction creates the fertile ground for a form of self-introspective practice/scrutiny that goes hand in hand with moral practice and non-attachment to the self and the practice practiced.

The deconstructive similes and metaphors that Luangpho Chah uses are thought provoking. In all his dhamma talks there are some extremely pithy statements that are located at strategic points. One such example is: "Regardless

⁷ Ibid. p.3.

⁸ Pâli: *dhutanga* is the austere practices recommended by the Buddha for monastics to overcome defilements and establish purification of the mind through the cultivation of renunciation, contentment and mindfulness. In the Thai context, the term usually refers to monks who practice an ascetic way of life focusing on wandering, long distance walking and outdoor meditation practice.

and inextricable linking. When asked about the practice of meditation Luangpho Chah replied, “Meditation is like a single log of wood. Insight and investigation are one end of the log; calm and concentration are the other end. If you lift up the whole log, both sides come up at once. Which is concentration and which is insight? Just this mind. You cannot really separate concentration, inner tranquility, and insight. They are just as a mango that is first green and sour, then yellow and sweet, but not two different fruits. One grows into the other; without the first, we would never have the second. Such terms are only *conventions* for teaching. We should not be attached to the language.”¹⁷ Thus Luangpho Chah’s form of deconstruction is more of an ‘undoing’ than a ‘destruction’, of polarized categorization and manifests itself in the careful teasing out of forces and layers of signification within a given text/context.

Luangpho Chah’s kind of contemplative and rational understanding of meditation helps to deconstruct the actual act of meditation practice thereby removing from it any mark of fetishization. He says, “Peace is within oneself, to be found in the same place as agitation and suffering. It is not found in a forest or on a hilltop, nor is it given by a teacher. Where you experience suffering, you can also find freedom from suffering. To try to run away from suffering is actually to run toward it.”¹⁸ He thus emphasized not just formal meditation practice for the sake of it but on real meditation that has to do with attitude and awareness in any activity, not just with seeking silence in a forest cottage.

He emphatically points out that when the mind does not grasp or take a vested interest, does not get caught up, things become clear. Right understanding arises from the attempt at looking very objectively at a particular situation or event and understanding it as it-is-in-itself and not colouring it with our subjective views that arise from personal likes and dislikes. He clarifies this in one of his dhamma talks – “When you take a good look at it, the world of ours is just that much; it exists just as it is. Ruled by birth, aging, sickness, death, it is only that much. Great or little is only that much. The wheel of life and death is only that much. Then why are we still attached, caught up, not removed? Playing around

¹⁷ From the Dhamma Talk “Study and Experiencing”, p.15.

¹⁸ From the Dhamma Talk “Right Understanding”, p.30.

with the objects of life gives us some enjoyment; yet this enjoyment is also just that much.”¹⁹

Holistic well-being in Luangpho Chah’s deconstruction

Luangpho Chah’s kind of mindful deconstruction upholds a paradigm of holistic well-being which benefits the mind at the spiritual, psycho-cognitive and philosophical/contemplative level. At the ethico-spiritual level, the deconstructive approach trains the mind to free itself from defilements and all sorts of evil thoughts and unwholesome mental formations through the routine practice of cultivation of mindfulness focusing on the practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation and ethical reflection. The rigorous training insists on recognizing the arising of defilements – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*) – and discarding these defilements through the practice of mindfulness. As Luangpho Chah says, “The only way to reach an end in the practice of virtue is by making the mind pure.”²⁰ With the constant mindful effort at recognizing defilements and then annihilating them, morality comes to be established on a firm attitudinal disposition that is marked by clarity of vision and understanding of the Law of Kamma i.e. resultant good or bad effects consequent on good or bad deeds. With unshakeable moral foundation the mind naturally matures to that level when it does not harbor negative emotions like feelings of jealousy, vindictiveness and revenge and so becomes calm, peaceful and non-confrontational. The non-confrontational disposition emerges because in its attempt to eradicate defilements the mind has already learnt to recognize and wage the internal war to vanquish such unwholesome states of mind like greed, hatred and delusion every time they arise.

At the psycho-cognitive level, the mind is enriched by the flow of positive emotions. The spiritual or moral maturity benefits the mind immensely at the psychological level as when in the absence of defilements the mind is enriched by various positive emotions such as contentment, love, fellow feeling, and self-reflexivity. The inner healthy state of mind is outwardly manifested in various positive behavioral patterns like happiness, gentleness in speech and bodily actions,

¹⁹ From the Dhamma Talk “Just That Much”, p. 43.

²⁰ From the Dhamma Talk “Rules Are Tools”, p.114.

non-aggressiveness, moral uprightness, concern for others, etc. With the influx of positive emotional states and mindful sustenance of them, the mind remains calm, peaceful and non-agitated and hence non reactive to negative and adverse forces and unfavorable situations. When the mind is continually calm and peaceful it is innocuous and hence receptive to positive flow of mental energy that ultimately leads to infusion of inspirational joy in oneself and others alike. As Luangpho Chah says, “The point of all practice is to lead to freedom, to become one who knows the light all the time.”²¹

At the contemplative level, the deconstructive approach enables the mind to arrive at the state of equanimity (*upekkhâ*). The mind free from defilements and desires and established on virtues gradually acquires the state of equanimity as it proceeds to see clearly all sense impressions having a common nature – impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. When equanimity is maintained, the mind gradually recognizes the pernicious workings of the ego and can distance itself from it. With growing mental strength imbibed from the practice of insight meditation and reflective apprehension of the fleeting nature of all things and the truth of *anattâ* or non-substantiality i.e. all phenomena are non-self, and that there is no real essence, soul, or self, the ego can be transcended for good. A balanced mind is one that is free from clinging to the ego. When the mind matures with the transcendence of the ego, the mental state moves to the state of egolessness and once this state is achieved the mind ceases to work within the dictates of binary oppositions. This is possible because the mind is trained to see through the process of thought construction and creation of illusions that arise from continuous clinging to various physical objects and mental formations, both wholesome and unwholesome. The mind that is habitually meditative and mindfully aware realizes that good or evil only arise in one’s mind and so to be fully liberated one needs to step out of any such binaries. Transcending the binary oppositions the mind develops non-attachment to the ego, stimuli-driven pleasures or displeasures and all mental formations – spiritual, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. The mind at this stage is tranquil and liberated with pure awareness and calmed of both elation and sorrow. This is when one realizes the Middle Path in

²¹ Ibid.

Not only the message of non-clinging but the lesson of deconstruction of the ego is useful to end linguistic bickerings, racial prejudices and religious disputes that have bred uncanny hatred, jealousy, vain pride, suspicion, contempt, subjugation and misuse of power among different groups of people. To sustain the reality of hybridity and multiculturalism that are characteristic traits of today's world of globalization, the deconstruction of the individual ego is indispensable. The experiences of colonialism and the two world wars have shown that vain pride in one's racial and cultural origins gives rise to hatred and contemptuous disregard for other cultures and people outside one's own community leading to untold miseries and pain and disruption of unity and harmonious co-existence. When the principle of deconstruction of the ego is put into real practice, it helps to replace parochialism and jingoistic tendencies with loving-kindness and compassion towards others and fosters a more receptive world view which is based on tolerance, impartiality, fairness and egalitarianism. With a kind and compassionate mental disposition one can learn to accept and celebrate differences among groups of people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. While teaching his ordained disciples from various different countries and religious backgrounds Luangpho Chah emphasized, "For harmony with the group, we must give up pride and self-importance and attachment to fleeting pleasure. If you do not give up your likes and dislikes, you are not really making an effort."²³

The type of mindfulness that Luangpho Chah has urged us to develop is required for our fight with ourselves, to distill our hearts from 'bad faith' and sterilize our minds from unwholesome desires so that we are not slavishly caught up in the nexus of me and mine, I and the other. Both through the cultivation of mindfulness and reflective internalization of non-substantiality or *anattâ* a holistic world view can be developed. At the mundane level, Luangpho Chah's emphasis on non-substantiality or *anattâ* is indispensable to reduce hatred and deconstruct all conflictual categories and at the supra mundane level, reflective understanding of *anattâ* in day to day life leads to blissful contemplation and makes life worth-living. As Luangpho Chah says, "Our lives are like the breath, like the growing and falling leaves. When we can really understand about falling leaves, we can sweep the paths every day and have great happiness in our lives on this changing earth"²⁴.

²³ From the Dhamma Talk "Harmony With Others", p.119.

²⁴ From the Dhamma Talk "The Leaves Will Always Fall", p.104.

Conclusion

Luangpho Chah possessed great mastery in using the deconstructive mode of teaching that emphasized on non-reification of any absolute entity. He directed his teachings to both his ordained disciples and lay followers in confronting and working directly with their own problems of greed, judgment, hatred and ignorance. His direct and simple teachings always turn his followers back to their own minds, the source and the root of all trouble. His teachings emphasized that understanding the *tilakkhana* and putting this understanding into practice leads to understanding everything in life and nature as-it-is-in-itself. This understanding is not inaction and passive acceptance as some people might hastily conclude. Enlightenment does not mean deaf and blind. On the other hand, enlightened understanding leads to empirical deconstruction of the 'self' and the 'self-in-action'. Time and again Luangpho Chah emphasized on seeing through the process of thought construction so as to recognize from one's own experiential reality the fact that when the mind is stirred from the normal state of tranquility, it leads away from right practice to one of the extremes of indulgence or aversion, thereby creating more illusion, more thought construction. A true understanding of the nature of the mind helps people to free it from conventional reality and so the mind is not enslaved by codes, customs, traditions, conventions, linguistics choices, personal predilections. Once this state can be achieved all binary oppositions get automatically collapsed leading to no more creation of dichotomy/polarity and slavish clinging to its hierarchical chasm.

The Dhamma of Luangpho Chah is down-to-earth, but yet difficult to realize and understand, especially when the mind is ceaselessly caught up in the quagmire of defilements, heedlessness to defilements and lack of mindfulness. It requires moment-to-moment self-scrutiny and mindful practice of 'letting go'. In this form of empirical-deconstruction which involves conscientious and mindful teasing apart of all binary oppositions and releasing from their binding, there is no room for *aporia* or conflictual and conceptual hiatus. Although Luangpho Chah was not a philosopher in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless, his numerous dhamma talks bear testimony to the fact that he incessantly worked within the matrix of a mode of practice that can be categorized as a practical-form-of-deconstruction. Such a mode of practice does not valorize the 'written' text alone

