

From Nāgārjuna to Ajahn Chah: Buddhist deconstruction in theory and practice

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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

Prelude:

This paper is an attempt at analyzing the deconstructive mode of practice in Nāgārjuna, the second century Buddhist logician and Ajahn Chah (Phra Bodhiñana Thera), a well-known twentieth-century meditation master from the Thai-Isan forest tradition. While deconstruction as a movement in philosophy came into origin from the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1936-2004), many of its fundamental concepts like dismantling of binaries and trace had been predominantly prevalent in Buddhism ever since its appearance as a new soteriological mode of praxis more than 2600 years ago. Given the antiquity and ubiquity of polarized thought processes dominating every human discourse, it is interesting to see how dismantling of binaries takes place, on the one hand, through the use of logical propositions by Nāgārjuna and on the other hand, through rigorous mindfulness practice based on vipassanā meditation by Ajahn Chah. Nāgārjuna's primary contribution to Buddhist philosophy is in the use of the concept of śūnyatā, or "emptiness," systematically expounded in his treatise Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way) and which he famously rendered in his tetralemma with the logical propositions:

X (affirmation)
non-X (negation)
X and non-X (both)
neither X nor non-X (neither)

While Ajahn Chah refrains from using any such syllogistic method, his formulaic practice of 'letting go' is a powerful conceptual tool to put the mind into test in fully recognizing the three characteristics of existence – anicca, dukkha and anattā in all dependent co-relational dimensions. The cerebral practice of 'letting go' has its roots in formal practice of insight or vipassanā meditation along with strict adherence to precepts and monastic codes and moment to moment awareness of every arising thought, be it wholesome or unwholesome. Practice, decipher, and let go – this method is not only well demonstrated through Ajahn Chah's extraordinarily disciplined monastic lifestyle and practice, but also gets reinforced in the numerous dhamma talks that he delivered to both his monastic and lay disciples. Interspersed by thought-provoking similes and metaphors, the dhamma talks demonstrate to what extent Ajahn Chah strategically aimed at deconstructing dichotomous thought-processes by mindfully defying reification of all mental formations, conditioned states and conventional linguistic signs – be it the written

word or the verbal utterance. Derridean challenge to binary oppositions is centered upon deciphering and decoding logocentricism within the western philosophical paradigm, but what is deconstructed in the logical formulations of Nāgārjuna and the simple yet profound teachings of Ajahn Chah is not just language, but the human Ego itself in all its kammic dimensions – linguistic, psychological, social, ethical, cultural and conceptual orientations. Through the juxtaposition of Nāgārjuna and Ajahn Chah, this paper aims at discussing the implications of Buddhist deconstruction at the theoretical and practical level and how within this nexus there exists the continual downplaying of dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the other, existent and non-existent.

Introduction

Buddhism teaches that to understand the Four Noble Truths – suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its complete extinction – is to see reality as it truly is. Reality, in Buddhism is grounded on the perspective of non-substantialism and is understood not in terms of subjectivism of the individual self and its interaction with the world, but rather the objective understanding of the network of interdependently arising cause and effect continually coming into existence and subsiding.

The existence of things as well as their arising and passing away are clearly expressed in the famous formulaic statement: When that exists, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases.¹

Thus, Buddhist ontology rests on the premise that all phenomena are dependently originated. Due to the cause of dependent arising, all phenomena lack any absolute and intrinsic essence and are by nature devoid of any centric substantiality or selfhood. This emptiness of essence is what the Buddha termed *anattā* and which later came to be known as *śūnyatā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Taking into consideration this unique teaching of non-substantiality it would be neither wrong nor too far-fetched to claim that 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 (*anattā*).

Long before Western philosophy came to deconstruct the *epistemic* category of “self-presence” or “self-identity” through the logic of derridean *différance*², Buddhism recognized the fallacy inherent in the substantialist world-view with its focus on the self and had successfully dismantled it through the principle of causality or dependent arising. Dependent Origination or Causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is the central philosophy of Buddhism and through it the Buddha explained the functioning of phenomena or conditioned states (*dharmas*) without having resorted to a conception of a permanent and eternal entity. Since all phenomena are dependently arisen, inherent in them are the conditions of impermanence, suffering and non-self.

The Buddha put forth Dependent Origination as a naturally occurring principle of truth: Whether an enlightened Tathāgata were to appear in this world or not, this principle would still prevail as an enduring aspect of the natural order – that is, conditionality

¹ *Majjhima-nikāya* 1.262-264, ed. V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, London: PTS, 1887-1901.

² The term denotes a differential relation in all systems and activities which infects them from the very beginning or outset with an ‘otherness’ that is non-present and that which is therefore incapable of interiorization or sublation. In his book entitled *Positions* Derrida writes, “Difference is the systematic play of differences of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other.”

(*idappaccayatā*). Bhikkhus, objectivity (*tathatā*), necessity (*avitathatā*), invariability (*anaññathatā*) constitute the principle of conditionality (*idappaccayatā*) that is called dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).³

Thus it is clear that 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.⁴ The Buddha's notion of non-substantiality (*anattā*) was the direct result of his rejection of a permanent and eternal entity arising as a result of the recognition of the existence of a personality *prior* (*pūrvā*) to the experiences of seeing, hearing, and feelings. In a passage in the *Sutta-nipāta* the Buddha said, "Let him destroy the entire root of obsession with the self."⁵ The Buddha's discourse on the five aggregates (*skandha*) was intended to refute the notion of a spiritual self (*ātta*) and the discourse on elements (*dhātu*) was meant to reject the notion of a material self or eternal matter. 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 Derridean deconstruction with its critical questioning of all notions of "self-presence" or "self-identity", the Buddha appears to be a forerunner whose mega-deconstructionist mode of practice dismantled two absolutistic theories prevalent during his time namely, the Upanishadic concept of permanent existence or eternalism (*sassata-diṭṭhi*) and the nihilistic concept of non-existence or annihilationism (*uccheda-diṭṭhi*). By denying these two opposing camps the Buddha laid the foundation of a way of thinking and practicing solidly based on the Middle Path in which the philosophical and the practical are not mutually exclusive but rather interdependent.

The Middle Path is not a theoretical standpoint but is a path that can be trodden by one and all, for the Buddha did not simply preach about it but taught the method to practice along this path. To arrive at a conceptual and experiential understanding of the Middle Path in its entire dimensionality it is essential to realize the four components involved – principle or axiomatic truths, perspective, conceptual framework, and practical method. Firstly, any understanding of the Middle Path starts with the understanding and acceptance of the axiomatic truths incorporated in the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) – suffering (*dukkha*), origin of suffering (*samudaya*), cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga*). Secondly, it is based on the perspective of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*) and the five aggregates (*pañcakkandha*) – corporeality (*rūpakandha*), sensation (*vedanākkandha*), perception (*saññākkandha*), mental formation (*saṃkhārakkandha*) and consciousness (*viññāṇakkandha*). Thirdly, the Path itself is grounded on the conceptual framework of the dependent origination with all the twelve linking factors – ignorance (*avijjā*) → volitional actions or mental formations (*saṃkhāra*) → consciousness (*viññāṇa*) → mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*) → sense-bases (*salāyatana*) → contact (*phassa*) → sensation (*vedanā*) → craving (*taṇhā*) → attachment (*upādāna*) → becoming (*bhava*) → birth (*jāti*) → decay-and-death (*jarā-maraṇa*). And

³ *Samyuttanikāya*.II.25. Also quoted in full in PA Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, tr., Grant A. Olson, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995, p.77.

⁴ Dipti Mahanta, "The Isan forest meditation tradition: A praxis of mental well-being vis-à-vis global recovery", *UNDV Conference Volume*, (Dion Peoples, ed.) Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, Bangkok, 2010, p.589.

⁵ D. Anderson and H. Smith ed., *Suttā-nipāta* 916, PTS, London, 1913.

lastly, to investigate the Middle Path oneself and to realize it at the experiential level one applies the practical method of mindfulness i.e. the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

The Middle Path was not superimposed by the Buddha as yet another “mega-narrative” to attract and manipulate new adherents. In fact the Buddha was quite open from the very beginning about all his teachings and encouraged analytical reflection and reasoned attention (*yonisomanasikāra*) more than blind faith. In the *Kalama Sutta*, 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 *Tathāgata* (Buddha) himself, so that he (the disciple) might be fully convinced of the true value of the teacher whom he followed.

Within the socio-religious nexus the dialectics of deconstruction underlay Buddha’s rejection of the hierarchical caste system that had a powerful grip on the traditional Hindu society, his *re*-interpretation of the term *brahman*, the Vedic tradition of worshipping the six directions, etc, but at the highest contemplative level, this dialectic manifested in his emphasis on overcoming clinging to everything, including his teachings.

Once the Buddha explained⁷ the doctrine of cause and effect to his disciples, and they said that they saw it and understood it clearly, then the Buddha said: ‘O bhikkhus, even this view, which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of.’⁸

The simile of the *raft* is very powerful and through it devotees and disciples are taught non-attachment even to the supreme thing i.e., the dhamma. The metaphoric reference is not only suggestive of the Buddha’s non-sectarian approach but also of his deep-rooted opposition to the formation of any ‘mega-narrative’ through his teachings.

But the Buddha knew that it was not easy for unenlightened people to go to the highest level of understanding in which all dualistic thought processes dissipate naturally and so to facilitate right understanding he taught at the foundational level of distinguishing truths into two categories – conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*). In the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*, he distinguishes the two terms – *nītattha* (clear) and *neyyattha* (obscure) and observes:

‘Everything exists,’ – this, Kaccāyana, is one extreme.

‘Everything doesn’t exist,’ – this, Kaccāyana, is the second extreme.’

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

⁷ In the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta*, no.38 of *Majjhima-nikāya*, PTS edition, London. See also, W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p.11.

⁸ *Majjhima-nikāya* I, PTS, London, p. 260.

Kaccāyana, without approaching either extreme, the Tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle...⁹

Nāgārjuna's deconstruction

The understanding of reality as a network of dependent co-arising came to bear great influence not only in early Buddhism but in all later developments. In the Mahāyāna tradition, this dependency came to be interpreted in a three-fold way: firstly, it is to be understood that behind every phenomenon or a conditioned state there lays a network of causes and conditions; secondly, all wholes are dependent on their parts and vice-versa and finally, it is through conceptual imputation that phenomena come to be recognized and identified.

Nāgārjuna, the second century logician and founder of the extraordinarily dialectical analytic philosophical school known as Mādhyamika reiterated the principle of dependent arising or causality in order to make people understand the Buddha's original message of non-self that was on the verge of amnesiac metamorphosis due to infiltration of new interpretations from different Buddhist schools like the *Sarvāstivādins*, who came up with a theory of "self-nature" or "substance" (*svabhāva*) and the *Sautrāntikas* who uphold a non-identity theory of causation and a theory of moments.

In refuting the logician's criticisms, Nāgārjuna, himself a master dialectician, does not disdain formal logic. Why are all things 'void' (*śūnya*) or 'devoid of an 'intrinsic nature' (*niḥsvabhāva*)? Nāgārjuna's 'reason' (*hetu*) is that all things are 'dependently originated'.

Thus, in his famous treatise on metaphysics and epistemology *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental verses on the Middle Way) he develops the argument on purely logical footing that since all phenomena exist interdependently they are empty of essence. In this text, comprising of 27 chapters, he re-investigates different concepts – causality, perception, motion, action, agency, selfhood, truths, elements of existence and views – through the use of the formulaic propositions of his strategically used *catuṣkoṭika* or tetralemma:

X (affirmation)
non-X (negation)
X and non-X (both)
neither X nor non-X (neither)

No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from non-cause (I.1).¹⁰

But to teach the dependent origination Nāgārjuna had to restate the Buddha's distinction of truths into conventional and ultimate in an even more strident manner as expressed in the classic formulation in section XXIV of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddha is based upon two truths: truth relating to worldly convention and truth in terms of ultimate fruit. Those who do not understand the distinction between these two truths do not understand the propound truth embodied in the Buddha's message. Without relying upon convention, the ultimate fruit is not taught. Without understanding the ultimate fruit, freedom is not attained. (XXIV. 8-10)¹¹

⁹ L.Feer ed., *Samutta-nikāya* 2.17, PTS, London, 1884-1904.

¹⁰ David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna – The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1986, p.105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.331-333.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, through the extensive use of the logical apparatus of *catuskoṭika* Nāgārjuna was not only developing the argument that since all phenomena exist interdependently they are empty of essence, but he was doing something deeper at the level of inter-textuality. Just as most deconstructionist writings today strategically incorporate the philosophical mode of conceptualization into content rendition (the act of *re-reading* of all texts), Nāgārjuna was, in a sense, practicing in his own work the very didacticism involved therein. For he was not only referring back to the Buddha's original concepts of two truths – conventional and ultimate – while re-examining all the major concepts but was strategically demolishing the conventional understanding of these concepts through the higher reflective understanding of emptiness. In other words, by incorporating the conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*, Skt. *saṃyṛti-satya*) in the ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*, Skt. *paramārtha-satya*) he undermined the former by letting the latter dominate all along in the verses themselves. That is to say, he was making the treatise a “living” embodiment or a practical example of the position, “the *paramattha-sacca* captures and incorporates the *sammuti-sacca*.”¹² The *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* thus makes a concrete case for the view of two truths where the lower truth hinges upon the higher truth only to be teased apart and penetrated by the latter in its all-embracing and inclusive gesture of ethico-spiritual progression. The *catuskoṭika* is thus used by Nāgārjuna as a means by which the philosophical verses would lead one from the *sammuti-sacca* to the *paramattha-sacca* truth through a process of dialectical progression in thought and through meditation on the nature of things as “exposed” in the text. But most interestingly, Nāgārjuna never declares any conceptually formulated doctrine to fall in the category of *paramattha-sacca* himself because for him, ultimately even *śūnyatā* or emptiness is empty in itself and devoid of any substantiality whatsoever: Thus, because of the emptiness of all existents, where, to whom, which and for what reason view such as the eternal could ever occur? (XXVII.29)¹³

In this penultimate verse of the final chapter “*drṣṭi-parīkṣā*” Nāgārjuna having absolutely denied the possibility of arising of any substantialist view in the face of emptiness of all existents he signs off his treatise with salutation to the Buddha and expressing his gratitude to the founder for teaching the doctrine of emptiness whereby he could relinquish all views: I reverently bow to Gautama who, out of compassion, has taught the true doctrine in order to relinquish all views. (XXVII. 30)¹⁴

With the aid of the four alternatives of the *catuskoṭika*: affirmation, negation, double affirmation, double negation, Nāgārjuna rejects all firm standpoints and traces a middle path between being and nonbeing. For instance, in an attempt to annihilate the Sarvāstivāda doctrine of dhamma that implied substantial and eternal existence (*sabbam sabbadā atthi*), Nāgārjuna established the non-substantiality of all phenomena or *dhammas* (Chapters III-XV). With equally cogent arguments he critiqued the metaphysical theory of a person (*pudgala*) propounded by the Sautrāntikas and their allies and established non-substantiality of the human self (Chapters XVI-XXI).

Just as for the Buddha for Nāgārjuna too, the emptiness of essence is the *ultimam veritatem* (ultimate truth) of all phenomena. For Nāgārjuna, as for the Buddha in the early texts, it is not merely sentient beings that are “selfless” or non-substantial; all phenomena are without any *svabhāva*, literally “own-being” or “self-nature”, and thus without any underlying essence. They are *empty* of being independently existent. This is so because all things arise always depending on conditions leading to their coming into existence and not

¹² R. D. Gunaratne, ‘Understanding Naagaarjuna’s Catuskoti’ *Philosophy East & West* V. 36 No. 3, (July 1986), pp. 213-234, University of Hawaii Press.

¹³ David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna – The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, p.390.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

by the workings of any inherent inner force or independent power of their own. Since independent arising is an impossibility, it implies that all things are devoid of any essence or substantiality that is permanent and everlasting. In other words, to have an essence is to exist independently, having one's distinct identity and existing solely in virtue of intrinsic properties and not in virtue of extrinsic relations along. Because all phenomena are interdependent, all are empty in this sense. Nāgārjuna's philosophical exposition highlighted this essencelessness and voidness of all existents with the logico-spiritual equation – the conventional truth about phenomena is their interdependence and their ultimate truth is their emptiness.

In chapter IX, Nāgārjuna deconstructs the idea of a persisting self in the form of a prior entity that transmigrates by an unequivocal rejection of the substantialist thought of *mantā asmi*. His argument shows how absurd and logically unsound such an assertion is. The implication of this assertion, as Nāgārjuna perceives, is that such a personality has to be separated from the experiences that emerge subsequently. Nāgārjuna raises questions as to how such a being could be made known independent of the sense experiences thus implying that the self-being (*aham asmi*) is dependent. His argument is that if the sensory experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling etc., can be separated from the personhood, it follows that they could occur even without such a being or personality:

“For whomsoever there exists seeing, hearing, etc., and feeling, etc., he exists prior to these.” So do some declare. How can there be seeing, etc. of an existent who is not evident? Therefore, it is determined that, prior to these things, such an existent is. Whatever existent is determined as existing prior to seeing, hearing, etc., and also feeling, etc., by what means is he [it] made known? If he is determined as existing even without seeing, etc., undoubtedly even these [i.e., seeing, etc.] will exist without him. Someone is made known by something. Something is made known by someone. How could there be someone without something and something without someone? Someone is not evident prior to all of seeing, etc. Again, on different occasions, one could be made known by things different from seeing, etc. If someone existing prior to all of seeing, etc. is not evident, how can someone existing prior to each of seeing, etc., be evident. If a seer is, at the same time, a hearer and feeler, then someone would exist prior to each one [of the functions]. But this is not proper. If seer and hearer and feeler are different, then, when there is a seer, there also would be a hearer, and as such there would be a plurality of selves. It [i.e., the ‘self’] is not evident in the elements from which seeing, hearing, etc., and feeling, etc. come to be. If he, to whom belongs seeing, hearing, etc. and feeling, etc., is not evident, then even these would not be evident. Wherein someone prior to, simultaneously with or posterior to, seeing, etc. is not evident, therein thoughts of existence and non-existence are also renounced. (IX.1-12)¹⁵

Although Nāgārjuna assiduously treated all the core concepts of the Buddha's teachings in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*'s it must be noted that the ultimate purpose of the treatise was not to stake out a sectarian position (a “*ditṭhi/dṛṣṭi*”, or “view”). In fact, Nāgārjuna repeatedly and emphatically states that to make a “fixed view” of his teaching is to miss its point completely. The ultimate purpose of logical formulation is soteriological: to demonstrate the fallacy of clinging to views or any standpoint whatever, however valid or true and, in so doing, to remove an obstacle to enlightenment.

¹⁵ David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna – The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, pp.188-194.

Luangpho Chah's deconstruction

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*¹⁶ 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 neither valorizes the 'written' text nor any logical syllogism, 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.

Just as Nāgārjuna's powerful use of the *catuṣkoṭika* stimulates meditative reflection on the interdependence of all conditioned states and their inherent emptiness, the deconstructive similes and metaphors that Luangpho Chah uses are equally thought provoking. In all his dhamma talks there are some extremely pithy statements that are located at strategic points. One such example is: "Regardless of time and place, the whole practice of Dhamma comes to *completion* at the place where there is *nothing*. It's the place of surrender, of emptiness, of laying down the burden. This is the finish. It's not like the person who says, "Why is the flag fluttering in the wind? I say it's because of the wind." Another person says because of the flag. The other retorts that it's because of the wind. There's no end to this! All these things are merely *conventions*, we establish them ourselves. If you know these things with wisdom then you'll know impermanence, suffering and not-self. This is the outlook which leads to enlightenment."¹⁷

While Derrida's challenge to binary oppositions is centered upon logocentricism, what is deconstructed in the teachings of Luangpho Chah is not just language, but the human Ego itself in all its kammic dimensions – linguistic, psychological, social, ethical and cultural garbs and orientations. In the numerous dhamma talks of this great renunciant monk of the forest tradition, it is clearly reflected that the trained mind of a meditator transcends its own ego and at a higher contemplative level proceeds to deconstruct all dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the other. As is succinctly expressed in one of his exhortations – "Give up clinging to love and hate, just rest with things as they are. That is all I do in my practice. Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not

¹⁶ Pāli: *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.

¹⁷ Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter ed., *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*, The Theosophical Publishing House, Illinois, 1985, p.34. All the sayings of Luangpho Chah quoted in this paper are taken from this book with emphases by the author. Subsequent reference will be made to the specific dhamma talk from the book with the corresponding page number.

become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing.”¹⁸

Given the antiquity and ubiquity of binary thought processes dominating every human discourse, it is interesting to see how in almost all of Luangpho Chah’s dhamma talks binary thoughts get ceaselessly dismantled time and again. Luangpho Chah’s form of teaching does not involve grandiose theory, but a form of dhamma exposition that is simple, direct yet profound at the same time. While the entire Derridean deconstructionist mode of critical practice engages in the practice of *neutralizing* the binary, Luangpho Chah stretches on undoing the whole thing and going beyond it by mindfully defying reification of all mental formations, conditioned states and conventional linguistic signs be it the written word or the verbal utterance. Thus, in his dhamma talks the dismantling of binary oppositions occurs at various levels – linguistic/discursive, ontological and meditative.

Linguistic deconstruction

While Derridean deconstruction is purportedly logocentric, Luangpho Chah adheres to non-logocentricism through his defying of linguistic reification of conditioned states and terms that denote such states. In one of his dhamma talks he says, “You must go *beyond* all words, all symbols, all plans for your practice. Then you can see for yourself the truth arising right there. If you don’t turn inward, you will never know reality.”¹⁹ This turning inward has nothing to do with aggrandizement of the individual ego, but rather its objectivization through the realization of its workings within the natural paradigmatic truth of existence – *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. The venerable ajahn has reiterated the message of emptying the mind in most of his dhamma talks – “When you practice, observe yourself. Then gradually knowledge and vision will arise of themselves. If you sit in meditation and want it to be this way or that, you had better *stop* right there. Do not bring ideals or expectations to your practice. Take your studies, your opinions, and store them away.”²⁰

Therefore, Luangpho Chah urges his monastic and lay disciples to go beyond words and see and experience the process of deconstruction by oneself. He says, “If you are interested in Dhamma, just give up, just let go. Merely thinking about practice is like pouncing on the shadow and missing the substance. You need not study much. If you follow the basics and practice accordingly, you will see Dhamma for yourself. There must be more than merely hearing the words. Speak just with yourself, observe your own mind. If you cut off this verbal, thinking mind, you will have a true standard for judging. Otherwise, your understanding will not penetrate deeply. Practice in this way and the rest will follow”²¹. Through the challenge to cut off the verbal/thinking mind the issue of metaphysics-of- presence is rendered at once redundant. However, to any person not conversant or familiar with meditation practice the challenge is not only burdensome but would simply appear unthinkable.

Non-logocentricism gets provocative expressions in yet another of his powerful sayings – “When our innate wisdom, the one who knows, experiences the truth of the heart/mind, it will be clear that the mind is not our self. Not belonging to us, not I, not mine, all of it must be dropped. As to our learning the names of all the elements of mind and consciousness, the Buddha did not want us to become *attached* to the words. He just

¹⁸ From the Dhamma Talk “The Simple Path”, p.5.

¹⁹ From the Dhamma Talk “Go Beyond Words: See for Yourself”, p.10.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p.11.

wanted us to see that all this as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. He taught only to let go²².

Ontological deconstruction

The hierarchical order of binary structures tacitly promotes a first-term sequence (male/right/good) at the expense of a second-term sequence (female/left/evil) and has generally resulted in privileging of unity (albeit, superficially), identity, and temporal and spatial presence over diversity, difference, and deferment in space and time. Going against and beyond the general paradigm of polarized and dichotomous thinking Luangpho Chah's teachings focus on the truth that all things exist only in relation to each other not with any permanent or absolute intrinsic attribute. In his dhamma talk "The discriminating mind" he explains this graphically – "Right understanding ultimately means nondiscrimination – seeing all people as the same, neither good nor bad, neither clever nor foolish; not thinking that honey is sweet and good and some other food is bitter. Although you may eat several kinds of food, when you absorb and excrete them, they all become the same. Is it one or many? Is a glass big? In relation to a little cup, yes; when placed next to a pitcher, no. Our desire and ignorance, our discrimination *color* everything. This is the world we create. There are always differences. Get to know those differences, yet learn to see the sameness too. Learn to see the underlying sameness of all things, how they are all truly equal, truly empty. Then you can know how to deal with the apparent differences wisely. But do not get attached even to this sameness."²³

Through ontological deconstruction Luangpho Chah aims to focus on the practice of identifying the source and mode of one's delusion. Delusion occurs through our failure to recognize and accept the true nature of our ontological reality which is marked by conditioned states that are constantly changing and hence are marked by impermanence and non-substantiality. Luangpho Chah further attempts at problematizing the binary system prevalent in the ethical categories as well because none of these categories has its own essence to distinguish itself from its opposite; both good and evil exist through conditioned causality and thus are empty of essence. With emphatic focus on non-reification of provisional distinctions and categories Luangpho Chah made oppositions vanish or be transcended upon recognition of it. His target is the deconstruction of notions of absolute distinction – "The Dharma is not out there, to be gained by a long voyage viewed through a telescope. It is right here, nearest to us, our true essence, our true self, no self. When we see this essence, there are no problems, no troubles. Good, bad, pleasure, pain, light, dark, self, other, are empty phenomena. If we come to know this essence, we die to our old sense of self and become truly free."²⁴

Deconstruction of meditation

Buddhist deconstruction as put into practice by Luangpho Chah is not simply a strategic reversal of categories, it mindfully seeks to *undo* a given order of priorities and the very system of conceptual framework and discursive practice that makes that order possible. The identity of separate entities is subverted as entities are demonstrated to be inextricably involved the one in the other. Traditional interpretation places *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation as distinct phases, levels, stages or methods in formal meditation training, but in Luangpho Chah's interpretation the dichotomy collapses altogether giving way to interdependence and inextricable linking. When asked about the practice of meditation Luangpho Chah replied, "Meditation is like a single log of wood. Insight and

²² From the Dhamma Talk "Study and Experiencing", p.14.

²³ From the Dhamma Talk "The Discriminating Mind", p.34.

²⁴ From the Dhamma Talk "Underground Water", p.175.

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.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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 with the objects of life gives us some enjoyment; yet this enjoyment is also just that much.”²⁷

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.”²⁸ 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

²⁵ From the Dhamma Talk “Study and Experiencing”, p.15.

²⁶ From the Dhamma Talk “Right Understanding”, p.30.

²⁷ From the Dhamma Talk “Just That Much”, p. 43.

²⁸ From the Dhamma Talk “Rules Are Tools”, p.114.

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, 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.”²⁹

At the contemplative level, the deconstructive approach enables the mind to arrive at the state of equanimity (*upekkhā*). 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 *anattā* 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 one’s practice. Luangpho Chah has pointed out, “The Buddha teaches us to keep laying down the extremes. This is the path of right practice, the path leading out of birth and becoming. On this path, there is neither pleasure nor pain, neither good nor evil. Our Path is straight, the path of tranquility and pure awareness, calmed of both elation and sorrow”.³⁰

A mind not enslaved by clinging is free from selfish desires and motives and as it realizes the true state of things as being subjected to constant change, suffering and selflessness, it gets infused with certain sublime states of mind such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The mind’s realization of the true nature of everything, including the human self in all its conditioned physical and mental states, as subject to repeated alterations and non-substantiality or selflessness, empties itself of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ From the Dhamma Talk “The Middle Way”, p.7.

egoistic self-fulfilling desires and selfish motives, and such an empty mind is the *tabula rasa* into which imprints of the sublime states of mind can get easily encoded without any exertion.

Benefits the world can reap from Buddhist deconstruction

The deconstructive message of non-substantiality and non-clinging so poignantly expressed in both Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and the dhamma talks of Luangpho Chah can serve as a panacea for the world steeped in the quagmire of growing discontentment. Both Nāgārjuna and Luangpho Chah have clearly demonstrated that when the mind does not grasp and is not caught up in the endless circles of desires and attachment, it leads to clarity of vision. The clear vision that can arise from non-attachment is badly lacking in our lives today. The different types of clinging that Buddhism identifies, such as: clinging to passions of the body, taste, smell, sound, sight, and other types of contact (*kāmuṇāpādāna*), clinging to views, such as opinions, doctrines and various theories (*ditthupādāna*), clinging to mere rules and rituals as the only true way (*sīlabbatupādāna*), and clinging to a self and mistakenly creating a self to cling to (*attavādupādāna*) have proliferated at a rapid scale, making people's lives centered upon extremely hedonistic and myopic concerns. As a result, no matter how high and sophisticated living standards have come to be, life still remains dull at the conceptual level.

Not only the message of non-clinging but the lesson of deconstruction of the self/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."³¹

The type of mindfulness and deep understanding of non-substantiality that Nāgārjuna and Luangpho Chah have 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 *anattā* a holistic world view can be developed. At the mundane level, Nāgārjuna and Luangpho Chah's emphasis on non-substantiality is indispensable to reduce hatred and deconstruct all conflictual categories and at the supra mundane level, reflective understanding of *anattā/sunyatta* in day to day life leads to blissful

³¹ From the Dhamma Talk "Harmony With Others", p.119.

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”³².

Conclusion

What we see in Nāgārjuna is the theoretical side of Buddhist deconstruction and in Luangpho Chah the practical side of it. Just as Nāgārjuna exposed through his logical propositions the emptiness of all phenomena including emptiness inherent in the very concept of *śūnyatā* itself, Luangpho Chah displayed great mastery in using the deconstructive mode of teaching through his emphasis on the practice of ‘letting go’ that led to non-reification of any absolute entity. As a logician Nāgārjuna’s text-bound exposition of emptiness of all phenomena and noumena led to a critical assessment of many heretical interpretations that appeared in the Buddhist tradition, whereas as a meditation master Luangpho Chah’s practice-oriented deconstructive teachings were directed to confronting and working directly with the individual’s own problems of greed, judgment, hatred and ignorance. Luangpho Chah direct and simple teachings always turn his followers back to their own minds, the source and the root of all trouble. The ethical message of both Nāgārjuna and Luangpho Chah emphasized that true understanding of the concept of non-substantiality 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 contrite logical propositions of Nāgārjuna demonstrate theoretical and linguistic sophistication, whereas the dhamma talks of Luangpho Chah demonstrate down-to-earth profundity in practice that has arisen from moment-to-moment self-scrutiny and mindful practice of ‘letting go’. In Luangpho Chah’s 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 as academically-oriented philosophers are likely to do, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb through the rigorous practice of both insight meditation and material simplicity in tandem. It can be concluded that the ‘deconstructive’ tool through which Luangpho Chah had sought to dispose of all self/ego arising positions helped lead to a state of knowledge or wisdom (*paññā*) the cutting edge of which provide axiomatic guidelines for a holistic living.

³² From the Dhamma Talk “The Leaves Will Always Fall”, p.104.

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