

# SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION IN THE TEACHINGS OF AJAHN CHAH

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the philosophical dimension of self-reflexivity as reflected in the teachings and practices of the Thai Forest Tradition monks, especially in the teachings of Ajahn Chah (Phra Bodhinyana Thera). Regular practice of meditation, strict adherence to the *vinaya*, or monastic disciplinary codes, a highly regimented life-style founded on austerity in living conditions, have made the Forest Tradition monks accomplished meditation masters. Their collected teachings form a corpus of guidelines for the cultivation of mental well-being and reflexive thinking that have inspired the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist alike, from prison inmates in the West to monastics and lay devotees in Southeast Asia. A mindful deconstruction of dichotomous thought-processes has been rigorously put into practice by almost all the Forest Tradition monks. As for instance, in the teachings of Ajahn Chah it is not just language, but the human Ego in all its *kammic* dimensions – linguistic, ethico-spiritual, and socio-cultural orientations – get dismantled time and again, as do all dualistic mental states arising from attachment to ‘me’ and ‘mine’, ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’. By consciously defying reification of all mental formations, conditioned states, dichotomous predilections and conventional signs – be it the written word in its varied embodied textuality, or a concept in its mere conceptuality – the simple, direct, and profound teachings

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bring to the fore the effectual significance of cultivation of self-reflexivity in daily life.

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*"Practice is not moving forward, but there is forward movement. At the same time, it is not moving back, but there is backward movement. And, finally, practice is not stopping and being still, but there is stopping and being still. So there is moving forward and backward as well as being still, but you can't say that it is any one of the three. Then practice eventually comes to a point where there is neither forward nor backward movement, nor any being still. Where is that?" Ajahn Chah*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is a religion that works within the matrix of a self-reflexive mode of praxis that places the very 'Self' that moulds this matrix, perpetually under erasure, by regarding the 'Self' as 'Non-self', as composed of the five aggregates (*khandha*) of form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), mental formations (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). Buddhism also lays great emphasis on the Self's internalization of the three-fold salient characteristics of existence – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*). In this paper I discuss self-reflexivity or metamentation as reflected in Buddhism, and as brought into rigorous practice through the exemplary teachings of the Thai Forest Tradition (*dhutanga*) monks, especially Ajahn Chah, a well-known meditation master who played an important role in establishing the Theravada Sangha in the West. Metamentation is a thinking process during which the mind reflects about its own thoughts in an objective manner. Repetitive metamentation that leads to the cultivation of mindfulness in a sustained manner underpins reflexive consciousness, ethical judgment, self-evaluation, determination, decisiveness, deliberation, psychological prowess, the ability to think ahead and

even foresee courses of future events. Taking a close look at the dhamma talks and teaching methods of the *dhutanga* tradition monks, it is observed that metmentation is an all-time preoccupation. And it is this focus that has caused them to mindfully deconstruct and break through the binaries of conventional and ultimate truths, sectarian reification and non-sectarianism, tranquility and insight meditation.

Recently, interests have been shown by scholars in the area of comparative studies of Buddhism and the philosophy of deconstruction. However, most of the published books and research papers invariably focus on a comparison between deconstructionist mode of linguistic and philosophical practice and Mahayana Buddhism. Robert Magliola in his book *Derrida on the Mend* delves into the correlation between ‘Derridean differentialism’ and ‘Buddhist differentialism’ as reflected in Nagarjuna’s explication of the concept of *sunyata*. Steve Odin engages in a similar comparative study of Derrida’s critical strategy of decentering and the differential logic of acentric Zen Buddhism in his paper “Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism.” Similar studies have been undertaken by a few Chinese, Korean and Japanese scholars. Jin Y. Park, for instance, in her latest book *Buddhism and Postmodernity: Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Postmodern Ethics* while comparing French postmodernism to Buddhist ethical approaches, seeks to develop a global ethic from the radical implications of Zen/Huayan’s dependent origination. As one reviewer has observed, “arguing from Buddhist causality’s *inexhaustibility*, Park brings the full impact of Buddhist openness to bear, so that finality is abrogated and compassion privileged.” In another of her edited text, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, the essays seriously engage the philosophical parallels between Buddhism and deconstruction by focusing on the profound and subtle implications of the Buddhist notions of dependent arising and emptiness by bringing the two truths together with deconstruction to address such problems as self and identity, language and referentiality. In Youru Wang’s edited *Deconstruction and the ethical*

*in Asian Thought* effort has been made by each of the contributing authors to focus on the ethical turn within deconstructionist theorizing of the later Derrida and Levinas and comparing this to South and East Asian philosophical texts, exploring the ways in which strategies of deconstructive or ‘aporetic’ ethics have been in operation for centuries in Asian thinking.

While each of the above mentioned texts played the pioneering role of opening up new vistas of fruitful deconstructionist mode of reading and dialogue between the East and the West, no endeavor is yet made to extend the comparative outlook to encompass the Theravadin tradition. In Thailand, no serious study of any meditation master’s teachings from the philosophical perspective of deconstruction has yet been undertaken.

If one goes by the conventional understanding of what philosophy is, or could be, then certainly the Forest Tradition monks’ teachings do not directly fall within the category of philosophical exposition in the strictest sense of the term. Yet, at a close introspection it appears that most of them incessantly worked within the matrix of a mode of practice that can be categorized as deconstruction-in-praxis that laid emphasis on certain wholesome practical aspects like strict adherence to monastic codes, mindfulness cultivation and living out the principle of ‘letting go’ in daily life. The teachings are bereft of any emphasis on external means and ritualistic excess. The tools employed to impart the deep knowledge of Buddhism were simple and down-to-earth, for example, Ajahn Chah used a human skeleton, a fetus in a glass jar, and ordinary images from nature which he held up to profound metaphoric level. All the monks in the entire lineage starting from Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Thet, Ajahn Doon, Ajahn Kamdi, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Liem down to Ajahn Sumedho and many other living masters underwent rigorous self-training through the practice of insight meditation and close scrutiny of the mind with reflective and rationalistic understanding of the Buddha’s teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*) and the three characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*). The praxis of mental training that has been developed and nurtured under the

aegis of the above mentioned and many other Forest Tradition monks, both dead and those still living, has come to epitomize the true Buddhist way of monasticism which is marked by such characteristics as non-clinging, egolessness, mindfulness, equanimity, compassion, simplicity, material frugality and contentment.

The main focus of the Forest Tradition monks has been to strike a balance in their practice by developing mindfulness in every action – verbal, physical and mental – through the mental training that consists of contemplating the *upādānakkhandha*, the groups of grasping, which manifest at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. These monks have demonstrated that upon reflexive consideration and realization of the Four Noble Truths the mind needs to focus on the three-fold training (*tisikkhā*) – morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) – as laid out within the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path. The forest meditation monks have not only taught the Noble Eightfold Path but most importantly have *lived* this Path themselves and so their teachings have powerful influence on their disciples and people who take interest in their teachings. These monks are very strict in their adherence to monastic codes or *vinaya* and along with it the practice of insight meditation brought discipline in their lives and practice, rendering morality a practiced reality in life, well encased within the parameters of a mind solidly grounded on the foundation of mindfulness and non-attachment.

Initially, these monks had always preferred to lead a wandering life, practising meditation in outdoor settings – in tiger and cobra-infested forests, mountain caves and forsaken cremation grounds – before settling down and establishing monasteries, especially to make themselves available to the lay community that sought their abiding teachings. The ascetic way of life and rigorous outdoor meditation practice made them true renunciant by enabling them to detach from all physical comforts and surviving on mere minimal requirements. From the voluntary cultivation of severing ties with material possessions and all physical comforts, they developed the mental prowess to face every difficulty, be it

physical or mental, in a detached, yet courageous manner. And most importantly, the rigorous outdoor meditation practice had provided the fertile ground for the realization and reflective internalization of the three characteristics of existence along with and the Law of Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppāda*) that depicts the endless cycle of birth and rebirth – becoming and dissolution. When monasteries grew around them, these monks implemented strict discipline to continue their way of practice themselves and to inspire their disciples to cultivate morality, mindfulness and wisdom through the practice of insight meditation in the same manner. Out of their dedicated effort, a praxis of mental well-being took shape the framework of which laid absolute emphasis on self-reflexivity in every action, starting from the most mundane acts of sweeping, cleaning the toilets, dyeing the robe, eating, etc to states of meditative absorption when one is involved in formal meditation practice.

## 2. DECONSTRUCTION AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Contemporary Western philosophy, especially Derridean deconstruction sees the influence of the traditional binary oppositions such as true–false, original–derivative, unified–diverse as infecting all areas of life and thought, including the evolution of Western philosophy from the time of Plato to Heidegger. The French philosopher and originator of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) upholds the idea that the task of the thinker is to twist free of these oppositions, and of the forms of intellectual and cultural life which they structure. Derrida draws our attention to the important issue that the individual terms of the binaries do not really have the same ‘status’. There exists an imbalance in the structure of the pairing in which one of the terms inevitably dominates the other (e.g. presence/absence, light/dark, man/woman, etc.) So, the first necessary action is to reverse the binary as a sign of justification. By doing so one is actually raising philosophical objections as well as uncovering socially oppressive operations of one of the terms of the binary. But mere reversal is not enough. Derrida points out that reversing the binary is but the *first step* that deconstruction has to undertake. 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 of that binary so as to displace it. 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 naïve 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” (Jaware, Aniket, 2001, p. 435). 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.

While the Derridean call for dismantling of dualistic hierarchies might be radical as a new exegetical tool possessing a self-righteous analytical edge, from the Buddhist perspective of ‘letting go’, however, it appears to be a metaphysical *cul-de-sac*, since it cannot detach and dislodge itself from the act of parasitical engagement with the play and teasing apart of binary oppositions. In contrast, a close ‘reading’ of the Forest Tradition monks’ dhamma talks, reveals the fact that there is always an objective distancing from the process of giving rise to an ‘Ego’ that might rejoice in the unraveling of the paradoxes situated within the binaries, quite unlike in Derrida and the gamut of texts generated under his powerful influence by academic pundits and literary critics, who do not hesitate to be ‘pretentiously opaque’ and whose deconstructive engagement of any text projects the ‘cultic-critic’ to the fore front. The Forest Tradition monks have demystified the entire practice by emphasizing on going beyond words, ritualistic symbols, elaborate plans, sectarian differentiation, and have focused instead on ‘turning inward’ for the pursuit of experiential knowledge through real confrontation with one’s own self rather than any illusionary/delusionary fetishized practice. This turning inward implies the reflexive understanding of the individual Ego – its attachments, self-aggrandizement, indulgent nature, fleeting moods, etc so that through objectivization its workings can be recognized and worked upon from within through a parallel reflexive understanding of the three-fold natural paradigmatic truth of existence. The message of emptying the mind is thus reiterated time and again – “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.” What Robert Magliola in his book *Derrida on the Mend* elucidates upon Derridean practice vis-à-vis Madhyamika philosophy very well applies here too – while the Derridean alternately celebrates and anguishes, hopes and waxes nostalgic, the Nagarjunist (in our case the ascetic and practice-oriented forest tradition monk) is aware and

serene, and has the security which comes with liberation; while the Derridean performs the logocentric and differential self-consciously and piecemeal, the Nagarjunist (in our case Ajahn Chah in particular) performs them by grace which is spontaneous but ‘at will’, a kind of off/self that moves freely between the objectivism of ego and pure devoidness. (Magliola, Robert. 1984, p.126.)

### 3. THE FOREST TRADITION VIS-À-VIS DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION

The Forest Tradition monks 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 Ajahn Chah uses are thought provoking. Moreover, the unique feature of his dhamma talks is that they are interspersed with extremely pithy statements/sentences that are located at strategic points. In the dhamma talk *Short and Straight* he says: “Hey, listen. There’s no one here, just this. No owner, no one to be old, to be young, to be good or bad, weak or strong. Just this, that’s all; various elements of nature playing themselves out, all empty. No one born and no one to die. Those who speak of death are speaking the language of ignorant children. In the language of the heart, of Dharma, there’s no such thing. When we carry a burden, it’s heavy. When there’s no one to carry it, there’s not a problem in the world. Do not look for good or bad or for anything at all. Do not be anything. There’s nothing more; just this.”

Vitality, fragility, death, beauty, ugliness, goodness, badness, weakness, strength, powerfulness, powerlessness – all this are merely *conventions*, we establish them ourselves and get ceaselessly caught up within the nexus of judgmental comparison giving rise to vanity, pride, racism, and prejudices. But the moment one knows these things with wisdom then one knows impermanence, suffering and not-self. This is the outlook which leads to enlightenment. What distinguishes Ajahn Chah's mode of reflexive thinking and practice is that they are not centered upon any word game as such; the unwillingness to indulge in prolix and convoluted wordplay is distinct. For him, lexical and conceptual deconstructions rendered through the use of common and ordinary similes and metaphors are merely a means of breaking through conceptuality and attachment in order to lead to a transformed state of reflexive consciousness and mindful awareness. In Ajahn Chah's type of philosophizing all Self/Ego arising positions are mindfully disposed off to help lead to enlightenment beyond language and conceptuality. His deconstructionist endeavours are geared to none other than the dawning of an inner peaceful state upon the transcendence of language, conventional truths, conceptual thinking, mental-formations and attachment to such mental states. It has arisen from practical lessons learnt from the practice of renunciation and insight meditation, quite unlike Derrida whose way of philosophizing is based on theoretical exposition of the philosophical and socio-cultural road map of the European civilization and the Jewish experience as the 'Other'.

Derrida in his text *The Gift of Death* states that: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others". That is why, for Derrida it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. He does, in fact suggests that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms. According to him, this is because: "I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never

justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it...What binds me to this one, remains finally unjustifiable". Derrida hence implies that responsibility to any particular individual is only possible by being irresponsible to the "other others", that is, to the other people and possibilities that haunt any and every existence. Such deconstructive way of arguing appears glib when placed against the Buddhist emphasis on taking into account 'cetana' or intention that guides any willed action.

It is understandable that Derrida's standard arguments or counter-arguments have arisen in the context of a Judo-Christian outlook that functions within the matrix of a discourse that takes the self (whether divine or human) as a centre, quite contrary to the Buddhist concept of non-substantiality/non-self or *anattā*. The radicality of Derrida's deconstructive practice appears to be limited when it is placed vis-à-vis the concept of Buddhist non-substantiality. The above quotes from Derrida also reflect the western mode of philosophizing that is based upon the edifice of structured argumentation guided by mere logical progression. But looked at from the Buddhist perspective, the *Derridean aporia* of equating non-attachment to non-compassion (for Derrida, Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal) appears to be rather naïve and simplistic, since it implies that compassion is rooted in attachment or compassion cannot arise without attachment.

Compassion is one of the four qualities comprising the sublime states of mind (*brahmavihāra*) that Buddhism upholds, namely, loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Every religion emphasizes to a great extent the first two of the sublime states and to a certain level the third factor too, but most religions are silent on the last factor. A careful consideration of all these four qualities clearly reveals the fact that Buddhism is a way of life more than a religion, since it has great psychological implications embedded in its teachings more than faith-oriented injunctions. If the four sublime states are taken into consideration, one can see that each of the states are related in an ascending scale or linear progression, the first leading to the

second, but at the same time are interconnected in a cyclical manner as far as each quality affects and sustains the other. For instance, if one aims at cultivating these four states, then one may as well begin with loving-kindness and gradually proceed with the remaining three states. At the same time, if one succeeds in cultivating, say the first two states, but fails at the next two, it would nullify the entire effort, since it is finally empathetic joy and equanimity that render the practice of the preceding two states of loving-kindness and compassion distinct sustainability. At a higher level of reflection, one can also see the contingency of these sublime states to the understanding of the three characteristics of existence. Just as impermanence and suffering bear contingency to the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion and empathetic joy, a reflection on *anattā* contingently gives rise to the maintenance of equanimity. The interconnectedness of each of these factors/states can easily be glossed over if we attempt to interpret after the fashion of Derridean deconstruction: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others”. Derrida’s glib generalization falls trapped in the chasm of the binary opposition of I and the ‘Other’ because it fails to comprehend non-substantiality or *anattā* that renders both I and the ‘Other’ the status of non-status i.e., non-selflessness and because this characteristic permeates and pervades equally either side of the binary, the opposition becomes not only redundant and a superficial one in ordinary Buddhist discourse, but is actually understood to be non-existent.

While the Four Noble Truths is the heart of Buddhism, *Anattā* remains its zenith. *Anattā* is put into practice by the Forest Tradition monks through ‘letting go’. Every Forest Tradition monk insists on following the Middle Way that emphasizes on not taking interest in either pleasure or pain and laying each of them down. The habitual nature of an untrained mind is to grasp at everything that is pleasant and reject with aversion all that is unpleasant; but clinging to pleasant states brings suffering as much as aversion to unpleasant states does. Letting go is a highly self-reflexive mental exercise that leads to peace, tranquility, and harmony

with oneself and one's surrounding. The Forest Tradition monks strove for that inner wisdom the attainment of which led to the realization that not only the body but the mind too is not one's own self – not belonging to us, not I, not mine and so all of it i.e. clinging to one's body and mind must be dropped. According to Ajahn Chah, real meditation has to do with attitude and awareness in any activity, not just with seeking silence in a forest cottage. “In the end, we must learn to let go every desire, even the desire for enlightenment. Only then can we be free.”

#### **4. THE DISMANTLING OF BINARIES IN THE DHAMMA TALKS OF AJAHN CHAH**

Given the antiquity and ubiquity of binary thought processes dominating every human discourse, it is interesting to see how in almost all of Ajahn Chah's dhamma talks, binary thoughts get ceaselessly dismantled time and again. Ajahn Chah's form of teaching does not involve grandiose theory, but a form of dhamma exposition that is simple, direct and yet profound at the same time. While the entire Derridean deconstructionist mode of critical practice engages in the practice of *neutralizing* the binary, Ajahn 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.

#### **5. DISMANTLING OF BINARIES AT THE LINGUISTIC LEVEL**

Ajahn Chah's adheres to a non-logocentric approach through his defying of linguistic reification of all conditioned states and terms that denote such states. In his dhamma talk *Go beyond Words: See for yourself* he emphasizes on going beyond all words and symbols, even to the extent of giving up all overriding wishes and plans for practice. While any plan in the conventional sense involves external issues like fixed retreat time, day, and routine, the plan of No-plan is one that

involves an inward moving attitudinal disposition that nullifies all external plans, once and for all. The true meditation retreat is a reflexive act of seeing the self for oneself. This turning inward is a metamentation process that brings to self-recognition the aggrandizement of the individual ego, and leads to its objectivization through the realization of the ego's subtle workings vis-à-vis the natural paradigmatic truth of existence – *anicca, dukkha* and *anattā*.

Ajahn Chah urges his monastic and lay disciples to go beyond words and not to cling to concepts. The mind should be focused upon seeing through and mindfully recognizing the process of changeability both within and without oneself. In the above dhamma talk, he reiterates, “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.” Through the challenge to cut off the verbal/thinking mind the issue of ‘metaphysics-of-presence’ of the Ego is rendered at once redundant.

In his dhamma talk *Ending Doubt*, Ajahn Chah echoes what the Buddha once said to the Kalamas. “Outward, scriptural study is not important. Of course, the dhamma books are correct, but they are not right. They cannot give you right understanding. To see the word *hatred* in print is not the same as experiencing *anger*, just as hearing a person’s name is different from meeting him. Only experiencing for yourself can give you true faith.” Non-logocentrism gets provocative expressions in yet another of his powerful sayings in the dhamma talk *Study and Experiencing* – “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 wanted us to see all this as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. He taught only to let go.”

## 6. ONTOLOGICAL METAMENTATIVE DISMANTLING

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, Ajahn Chah’s teachings focus on the truth that all things exists only in relation to each other not with any permanent or absolute intrinsic attribute. At times meanings of conventional terms are desacralized and shown as constructed by the exigencies of a shared system of relational signification only without any transcendental importance as a point of reference and validation. In order to cultivate right understanding which is beyond the workings of polarized thought processes, he emphasizes the need to recognize the contradictions and binary oppositions involved in traditional discourses and our ordinary perspectives. 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.”

Referentiality, in the Buddhist context is always empty, or non-self. Reference is not denied, however; it is perpetually put under erasure – problematized, bracketed, and relativized. If Derrida questions meanings or texts on the basis of differences, Ajahn Chah comes at these things from the other end – there inherent sameness – the sameness of emptiness or non-substantiality that permeates everything. While Derrida's way of philosophizing hinges upon the teasing apart of differences, Ajahn Chah puts under erasure these differences too through drawing attention to the permeating emptiness and proceeding to drop even the emptiness of emptiness, thus making the entire premise of deconstructive practice redundant. The mindful recognition of this redundancy renders Ajahn Chah's deconstructive mode a *lived* experience, both at the conceptual as well as spirituo-experiential level.

Through ontological deconstruction Ajahn 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. Ajahn 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 are thus empty of essence. With emphatic focus on non-reification of provisional distinctions and categories, Ajahn Chah made oppositions vanish or be transcended upon on recognition of it. His strident dismantling of all notions of absolute distinction is well reflected in the dharma talk *Underground Water* – “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.”

The important thing in Buddhism is that the ‘coming-to-rest’ of using names to take perceptions (*saññā*) as ‘self-existing’ objects actually deconstructs the ‘objective’ everyday world. In the dharma talk *The Timeless Buddha*, Ajahn goes to the extent of deconstructing the Buddha as a historical figure vis-à-vis the clarity of the unmoving mind. He explains, “We take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. This is the heritage of every Buddha that appears in the world. What is this Buddha? When we see with the eye of wisdom, we know that the Buddha is timeless, unborn, unrelated to anybody, any history, any image. Buddha is the ground of all being, the realization of the truth of the unmoving mind. So the Buddha was not enlightened in India. In fact he was never enlightened, was never born, and never died. This timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place. When we take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, all things in the world are free for us. They become our teacher, proclaiming the one true nature of life.”

## 7. NON-REIFICATION OF MEDITATION

Buddhist deconstruction as put into practice by Ajahn 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 Ajahn Chah’s interpretation the dichotomy collapses altogether giving way to interdependence and inextricable linking. When asked about the practice of meditation, Ajahn Chah replied in the dharma talk *Study and Experiencing*, “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.” Thus Ajahn Chah’s form of deconstruction is more of an ‘undoing’ than ‘destruction’, of polarized categorization and manifests itself in the careful teasing out of forces and layers of signification within a given text/context.

His 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 dispels the aura around meditation retreat by reducing it to a mundane activity of watchful and attentive awareness of one’s various moods and feelings which give rise to suffering. He asserts in *Right Understanding* “Know and watch your heart, it is pure but emotions come to colour it. Let your mind be like a tightly woven net to catch emotions and feelings then come and investigate them before you react...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.” 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 the dhamma talks *Just That Much* – “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.”

His dhamma talks endlessly indicate the necessity for a thoroughly self-conscious reading, one that subjects its own assumptions to close scrutiny. More practice and more reflection, the greater the practice the deeper is the ‘letting go’. He reiterates this more focused awareness while simultaneously dispelling the aura of human being as a ‘superior’ being by citing the example of a harness animal, the buffalo – “We must train our mind like a buffalo: the buffalo is our thinking, the owner is the meditator, raising and training the buffalo is the practice. With a trained mind we can see the truth, we can know the cause of our self and its end, the end of all sorrow.” Ajahn Chah uses the deconstructive mode of self-reflexive understanding of changeability and selflessness not only in regards to non-reification of entities in relational existence as *samatha* and *vipassana*, but also about such absolute truths as arahantship. At a gathering in one of his overseas trips when someone from the audience asked him whether he was an *arahant*, he compared himself to a tree laden with fruits and the tree’s indifference to all the birds (and their chirping) that come to feed and rest in its shade.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Ajahn Chah 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 Ajahn 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 the clasp or bondage of conventional realities and so the mind is not enslaved by codes, customs, traditions, conventions, linguistics choices, personal predilections, etc. 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 the Forest Tradition is down-to-earth, yet difficult to understand and realize, especially when the mind is ceaselessly caught up in the quagmire of defilements and lack of mindfulness. It requires moment-to-moment 'self-scrutiny' and mindful practice of 'letting go'. In this form of existentialistic and pragmatic form of deconstruction that involves conscientious and mindful teasing apart of all binary oppositions and getting released from their bindings, there is no room for *aporia* or conflictual and conceptual hiatus. Although Ajahn Chah was not a philosopher in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless, his numerous dhamma talks reveal the truth that he incessantly worked within the matrix of a mode of practice that can be categorized as deconstruction-in-praxis. Such a mode of practice does not valorize any 'text', not even the Buddha, but renders the training a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb through the rigorous practice of both insight meditation and austerity in tandem. The deconstructionist approach of Ajahn Chah helps to dispose of all Self/Ego arising positions and leads to a clear and reflexive understanding of the teachings of Buddhism.

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