

Remaining Innovative in the Pristine Form: The Relevance of the Thai Forest Tradition to the Contemporary World

Dipti Visuddhangkoon
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand

Abstract

Northeast Thailand (Isan) was the home of many great meditation masters whose lineage remains influential even at the present time. The austerity in the practice of meditative mindfulness that accompanied the strict adherence to vinaya or monastic disciplinary codes had made many monks of the forest tradition accomplished meditation masters, whose profound teachings are today widely disseminated across the globe. The collected teachings of such highly venerated monks as Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Thet, Ajahn Chah, and others form a corpus of reflective guidelines for the cultivation of mental well-being that is not only conducive to individual moral growth but also for communal spiritual health and mental well-being along the path set forth by the Buddha more than two millennia ago. In today's excessively consumption-oriented ambience that has had many pernicious and adverse effects on the overall mental well-being of people from every stratum of society, the teachings of the forest tradition monks become highly relevant to set the wheel of human progress acquire a balanced momentum. The relevance of the teachings arise from both their profundity and practical applicability, since underneath the teachings lay accumulated knowledge of each of the meditation masters, gathered over years of experiential quest to lead the mind to acquire that level of mindful understanding which is absolutely free from defilements and egoistic clinging. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested person, irrespective of religious and cultural background. In this paper we bring forth the universal garb of the teachings by first focusing on the different levels at which the forest tradition monks' practice benefits the mind, then highlight the contemplative thinking of the monks vis-à-vis Derridean deconstruction and finally conclude by reflecting on the lessons to be learnt from the forest tradition to solve various problems. \

Keywords: Remaining Innovative, Pristine Form

Introduction

The Northeast of Thailand has begotten many great meditation masters whose strict adherence to monastic disciplinary codes and practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation bereft of ritualistic excesses has helped preserve Buddhism in its pure and pristine form. In the recent past, Buddhism as a social institution has undergone tremendous changes as Thai society began to adapt itself to the process of modernization under the swaying influence of both capitalism and consumerism. As

Buddhists, most Thais today confine themselves to ritualistic worshipping and acts of merit-making more than any reflective practice of dhamma in day to day life. Across the country great emphasis has been laid on the structural expansion of Buddhadhamma, starting from the construction of huge Buddha images, meditation halls, elaborately decorated temples and convenient monastic dwellings.

The message of selfless renunciation, which forms the core essence of Right Thought (*sammā sankappa*), an essential factor leading to wisdom as incorporated in the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-atthangika-magga*), is at times completely lost from the scene. It is against this backdrop one needs to take a look at the way of life and practice of the *thudanga*¹ tradition of Northeast Thailand that has begotten such great meditation masters as Luangpoo Mun, Luangpoo Sao, Luangpoo Thet, Luangpho Chah, Luangpoo Khao and others². These monks who 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*) – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*), have come to epitomize the true Buddhist way of living which is marked by such characteristics as non-clinging, egolessness, mindfulness, equanimity, compassion and contentment. The praxis of mental well-being that has been developed and nurtured under the aegis of the forest tradition monks have set up the solid foundation for holistic well-being of the individual and the community in relation to the social and natural environment. The universality in the praxis can be applied at any time and situation by any interested person irrespective of religious and cultural background. Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike can gain from the teachings because the underlying messages embodied in them are free from sectarianism. The universal garb of the teachings can be understood from the praxis of mental well-being developed by these monks, the different levels at which their practice benefitted the mind, and their contemplative thinking which is a step ahead of Derridean deconstruction that can be beneficially put into practice for solving various problems at the global level.

Development of mental well-being

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 practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation that consists of contemplating the *upādānakkhandha*, the groups of grasping, which manifest at the moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. As faithful disciples of the Buddha, they have demonstrated that the benefits of the practice of insight meditation are tremendous. But before one can enjoy the fruits one needs to make the appropriate and

¹ The tradition of forest monks who voluntarily choose to follow a more austere way of life dates back to the Buddha. Besides Thailand, this tradition still exists in Laos and Myanmar.

² In Thailand, laypeople address a senior monk with such honorifics as *luangpoo* (venerable grandfather), *luangpho* (venerable father), or *ajahn* (variously spelt as *ajarn*, *ajan*, *achaan* and meaning respected teacher).

systematic effort. Upon reflective consideration and realization of the Four Noble Truths – the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering, the mind needs to focus on the three-fold training (*tisikkhā*) – morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) – as laid out in 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.

Right speech (*sammā vācā*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) and right action (*sammā kammanta*) are the ethical codes of the Noble Eightfold Path on the foundational base of which right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), right understanding (*sammā ditthi*) and right thought (*sammā saṅkappa*) are to be developed. The Noble Eightfold Path (Walpole R., 1990: 54) is a practical way that benefits everyone who treads the path. But it is a difficult way of life for people who are parasitically attached to worldly pleasures and are reluctant, indifferent or lethargic to fight back defilements that arise naturally and continually in the untrained human mind. There is no short cut to the Path, it has to be treaded upon by oneself. Others can teach us about it, help us memorize all the eight factors, but to gain benefit from the Path oneself and to demonstrate this benefit to others one has to tread the Path oneself. This is what the forest tradition monks have done by themselves; they have systematically practiced and lived the Path and so they have become enlightened renunciants whose expositions of the Dhamma have reached the hearts of many across cultures, countries and linguistic barriers.

Initially, these monks had always preferred to lead a wandering life, practicing 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 which sought their abiding teachings. The ascetic way of life and rigorous outdoor meditation practice made them true renunciants 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 – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-substantiality (*anattā*) and the Law of Dependent Origination (*patīcasamuppāda*)³ that

³ The twelve elements of dependent origination are: ignorance (*avijjā*) → mental formation (*saṅkhāra*) → consciousness (*viññāna*) → mind-and-body (*nāma-rūpa*) → six sense-bases (*salāyatana*) → contact

clearly depicts the cycle of birth and rebirth starting from ignorance (*avijjā*). 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 can be broadly discussed under the following levels.

At the ethico-spiritual level

The mind is free from defilements – The forest tradition monks’ lives centered around the routine practice of cultivation of mindfulness through insight meditation and ethical reflection which paved the path for cleansing the mind from all sorts of evil thoughts and unwholesome mental formations. The rigorous training insisted 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.”⁴

Morality is established on a firm footing – 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. In other words, a wholesome action (*kusala kamma*) begets good results and an evil or unwholesome action (*akusala kamma*) inevitably leads to bad results. As the Buddha said, “As you sow, so shall you reap.”

The mind becomes non-confrontational – with unshakeable moral foundation the mind naturally matures to that level when it does not harbor negative emotions like feelings of jealousy, vindictiveness and revenge and so becomes calm, peaceful and non-confrontational. The non-confrontational disposition emerges because in its attempt to eradicate defilements the mind has already learnt to recognize and wage the internal war to vanquish such unwholesome states of mind like greed, hatred and delusion every time they arise.

At the psychological 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

(*phassa*) → sensation (*vedanā*) → craving (*tanhā*) → clinging (*upādāna*) → becoming (*bhava*) → birth (*jāti*) → decay-and-death (*jarā-marana*).

⁴ All the sayings of Luangpho Chah quoted in this paper are taken from the book *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah* compiled and edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter, published by The Theosophical Publishing House, Illinois (1985).

manifested in various positive behavioral patterns like happiness, gentleness in speech and bodily actions, non-aggressiveness, moral uprightness, concern for others, etc. The mind is non-reactionary to adverse elements – 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.

Non self-destructive and infusion of inspirational joy – 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 has pointed out, “The point of all practice is to lead to freedom, to become one who knows the light all the time.”

At the contemplative level

The mind comes to a state of equanimity – the mind free from defilements and desires and established on virtues gradually acquires the state of equanimity or *upekkhā* as it proceeds to see clearly all sense impressions having a common nature – impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. In relation to *saṅkhāra*, this state of equanimity is equated with mental balance (*tatramajjhataṭṭā*) and as related to *vedanā*, it is equated with *adukkhamasukha* i.e. a feeling of neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant.

The mind transcends the ego – 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 not the 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.

The mind transcends the state of functioning within oppositional polarities – 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.

The mind develops non-attachment or non-clinging – 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, “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”.

The mind is infused with the sublime states – 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 physical and mental compositional form, as subject to repeated alterations and non-substantiality or selflessness, empties itself of 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.

In the numerous dhamma talks of the renunciant monks 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 Luangpho Chah succinctly expresses, “Give up clinging to love and hate, just rest with things as they are. Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing.”

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. So the French philosopher, 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 for that binary so as to get it displaced. If there is no displacement but mere reversal then there exist the perils of repeating the original imbalance – earlier structure with a negative notation. It merely puts a mark of negation onto something that was valued earlier. Such a 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, 2001: 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.

From the Buddhist perspective, however, Derridean dismantling of dualistic hierarchies is radical at the ‘political’ level, but is a metaphysical *cul-de-sac* since it cannot detach itself from the act of parasitical engagement with the play and teasing apart of binary oppositions. If we pay careful attention to the forest tradition monks’ (especially Luangpho Chah’s) play of paradoxes in their dhamma talks, we will observe that there is always an objective distancing from the process of giving rise to an ‘Ego’ that rejoices in the unraveling of the paradoxes, quite unlike in Derrida and the gamut of texts generated under his powerful influence by academically-oriented philosophers and literary critics, who do not hesitate to be pretentiously opaque and whose deconstructive engagement of any text helps project the ‘super-ego’ to the fore front. In one of his dhamma talks Luangpho Chah 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.” 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.” What Robert Magliola in his book *Derrida on the Mend* says about 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 Luangpho Chah particularly) 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, R., 1984: 126).

Buddhism and deconstruction

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

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

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

Ideally, worldly life should progress towards selfless renunciation (or monastic life), faith or devotion should deepen with a rational understanding and not directed to orthodoxy or blind adherence and rationalization should progress to non-attachment/non-clinging even to one's own faith⁵ since there is no self (*attā*) that is absolute or ever-lasting. Buddhism looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self or essence in all things and so the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) that has influenced and directed western thinking down the centuries has a reverse call in Buddhism – I think, therefore I am NOT.

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

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 (*Vimamsaka-sutta*, no.47 of *Majjhima-nikaya*, PTS edition). The dialectics of deconstruction also underlay Buddha's rejection of the hierarchical caste system that had a powerful grip on traditional Hindu society, his *re*-interpretation of the term *brahman*, the Vedic tradition of worshipping the six directions, etc.

The forest tradition vis-à-vis Derridean deconstruction

The forest tradition monks as followers of the Buddha themselves worked very much within the framework of a form of deconstruction that we may as well name as empirical deconstruction. These monks who emphasized on the *thudanga* practice

⁵ The Buddha cited the famous simile of the *raft* while teaching his followers not to cling even to his teachings. The teaching is compared to a raft for crossing over, and not for getting hold of and carrying on one's back.

geared their deconstructive endeavours to none other than the dawning of an inner peaceful state upon the transcendence of their ego, conventional truths, mental-formations and attachment to such mental states. They developed and adhered to a life's philosophy that was based on a rigorous deconstructive mode of practice that gave rise to a practical discourse of annihilation of the ego and the resultant understanding of any state of 'being' (both mental and physical) as it-is-in-itself. This mode of practice can thus be categorized as empirical deconstruction or deconstruction-in-praxis. Such a way of practice does not valorize the 'written' text, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb without at the same time erecting a 'mega-narrative' of the self-at-practice. This is possible because critically reflective Buddhist deconstruction creates the fertile ground for a form of self-introspective practice/scrutiny that goes hand in hand with moral practice and non-attachment to the self and the practice practiced.

The deconstructive similes and metaphors that Luangpho Chah uses are thought provoking. In all his dhamma talks there are some extremely pithy statements/sentences 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." What distinguishes Luangpho Chah's deconstruction from Derrida's deconstruction as centered upon word game is an unwillingness to indulge in prolix and convoluted wordplay. For Luangpho Chah, lexical and conceptual deconstructions are merely a means of breaking through conceptuality and attachment leading to a transformed state of consciousness. The essential difference between Derridean philosophy and Luangpho Chah's philosophy is that the deconstructive tool through which Luangpho Chah seeks to dispose of all self/ego arising positions helps lead to enlightenment beyond language and conceptuality. Luangpho Chah's deconstructive 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 other" (Derrida, J, 1992: 78). 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 and Anattā

Compassion is only 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*) (Payutto, P. A., 1995: 236-238). 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 very much 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 three characteristics of existence namely impermanence, suffering and non-substantiality.

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 other”. Derrida’s glib generalization falls trapped in the chasm of binary opposition of I and Other because it fails to understand non-substantiality or *anattā* that Buddhism so clearly explicates and is put into practice by all faithful followers of the Buddha including the monks from the forest tradition.

Anattā the universal moral paradigm is the heart or zenith of Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha claimed that the three characteristics that permeate the entire realm of existence would persist irrespective of the fact that whether a *Tathāgatha* (an enlightened being) would exist or not. Recognizing the truth of the three characteristics does not give rise to a pessimistic world view, but rather leads to a neutral approach to life and the world around us focusing on seeing a thing as-it-is-in-itself. Of all the three characteristics, *anicca* and *dukkha* are much easier to understand, since certain elements in life and nature clearly manifest both the characteristics. For instance, *anicca* or non-permanence can be understood and explained by drawing our attention to the constant changes that encompass life and nature. Similarly, suffering can be observed in day to day life from experiences that are inevitably negative such as disease, sickness, old age, death, failure, mental depression, etc. Anattā, on the other hand, cannot be easily referred to or explained with the help of external factors. As the most venerable Mahasi Sayadaw has rightly pointed out, “Even those who have professedly embraced Buddhism find it difficult to accept that there is no self, no living entity, only a continuous process of corporeality and mentality” (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1996: 125). While *anicca* and *dukkha* in a way can assist in the realization of *anattā*, nevertheless, it requires constant meditative and mindful reflection to understand, internalize and finally put into practice the truth of *anattā*. Doubtless, it is the most difficult and the highest truth the Buddha has taught humankind – the failure to realize which has made history repeat itself with chains of brutality from ‘holy crusades’ to ‘holocaust’, racism to jingoism!

While accepting the universality of *anattā* it is essential to recognize that no other religion upholds the truth of *anattā*. Almost all theistic religions in the world teach moral values and alongside it the devotion towards an almighty power, variously named as God, Allah, Bhagwan, etc. The concept of God is beautiful and has its utilitarian values in so far as it unites the followers of a particular religion and helps guide them along the moral path. But since God is an absolute authority, it is logically contradictory to the truth of *anattā*. God, the Supreme Being who is unanimously regarded by his followers as omnipotent, omnipresent, constant (i.e. non changeable) cannot be subsumed under the essential characteristic of non-self or non-substantiality. Buddhism, as an atheistic religion however can view the entire realm of existence very objectively and so *anattā* has formed an integral part of its teachings. The usefulness of

understanding *anattā* is varied. In fact, although it is not so easy to gauge the unfathomable truth of *anattā* (without the practice of *vipassanā* meditation), one cannot overlook its benefits in counteracting the evils of crime, corruption, racism and warfare, all of which are rooted in a self or *attā* oriented approach to life. In today's complex and confused (at least in the ethical sense) world of science and technology, the realization of *anattā* alone can help to counteract the trend of excessive fetishization of all sense objects that has given rise to both mental and environmental pollution.

Anattā put into practice through the deconstructionist praxis of '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. If one is genuinely interested in Dhamma, one must learn to just give up, just let go and not get caught up in the attachments of the world and in relative judgments. The habitual nature of an untrained mind is to grasp at everything that is pleasant and reject with aversion all that is unpleasant without attempting to contemplate that impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness run through both pleasant and unpleasant conditioned states alike. Therefore, clinging to pleasant states brings suffering as much as aversion to unpleasant states does. Luangpho Chah puts it graphically, "When through desire, the heart grasps what is pleasant, it is just grasping the tail of the snake. It only takes a little while longer for the head of the snake to come around and bite you".

The forest tradition monks have insisted on doing everything with a mind that lets go, that does not expect any praise or reward. This is because letting go is a highly self-reflective mental exercise that leads to peace, tranquility, and harmony with oneself and one's surrounding. No doubt it is the most difficult formula, but when put into practice it leads to true freedom. In the words of Luangpho Chah, "If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end. If you see states rising and falling in the mind and do not cling to the process, letting go of both happiness and suffering, mental rebirths become shorter and shorter. Letting go, you can even fall into hell states without too much disturbance, because you know the impermanence of them. Through right practice, you allow your old *kamma* to wear itself out. Knowing how things arise and pass away, you can just be aware and let them run their course".

The forest tradition monks are exemplary models of individuals who constantly strove for that innate 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 Luangpho 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".

Lessons from the forest tradition for global recovery

The amount of moral degradation in the world today has become unmeasurable. With the progress in science and technology life has become very comfortable, but at the same time extremely confused and complicated. As pristine religious and socio-cultural values are being abruptly replaced by a new set of values that places the cult of adoring the individual ego and its material success at the forefront, dishonest means of behavioral pattern get camouflaged under the veil of exterior smartness. It is today hard to find people who follow the five precepts – abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants – with unfaltering steadiness. People have become very cunning and masquerading in the art of swindling, embezzlement, forgery, fornication all of which have arisen from two main factors namely, mishandling of the ego and surrendering to endless desires.

Mishandling of the ego – by nature's rule the human self as a conditioned state is subjected to the traits of impermanence, suffering and non-substantiality. But the inability to understand the five aggregates of existence or life (*pañca-khandha*) – matter (*rūpakkhandha*), sensation (*vedanākkhandha*), perception (*saññākkhandha*), mental formations (*samkhāraakkhandha*) and consciousness (*viññānakkhandha*) – has caused the perpetual nurturing of the concept of 'Self' or 'Soul' or 'Ego'. The workings of the untrained ego are like deadly cancer cells that spread very fast. When left unabated the ego strives for fulfilling all its desires leading to moral conundrums.

Endless desires (*tanhā*) – According to the Law of Dependent Origination, the life process begins because of the desire of becoming, so desire is natural. But Buddhism teaches us to see the dangers of this natural element, especially when it proliferates and takes a self-destructive turn. In today's consumer-oriented culture, mass production and consumption of endless consumer products have triggered a nonstop combustion of desires which is as pernicious as an atomic blast when its obnoxious effect on the physical, mental and natural environment is taken into consideration. Every society is under the grip of craving (*tanhā*), an obnoxious element that enslaves the untrained human mind leaving behind trails of sorrow, dissatisfaction, and conflict. All forms of desire or craving such as craving for bodily forms (*rūpa-tanhā*), craving for sound (*sadda-tanhā*), craving for smell (*gandha-tanhā*), craving for taste (*rasa-tanhā*), craving for physical contact (*phoṭṭhabba-tanhā*), and craving for mental stimuli (*dhamma-tanhā*) have escalated in our technologically advanced world today. As a result, every society is not only witnessing an increase in crimes and corruption but also an overall dilapidation of basic moral values.

From our comfort-oriented lives today, the lifestyle of the forest tradition monks may appear rather difficult, crude, irrelevant, utopian, ideal and non-appealing. Yet, in order to deal with the various problems that have arisen in the world due to the perilous mishandling of the ego and the rekindling and fueling of endless desires, we cannot afford to deny the inspirational, thought-provoking and abiding teachings of the great meditation masters from the forest tradition. Certain very useful messages from

their thinking and practice can be emulated for the cultivation of a holistic approach to life and living.

The message of selfless renunciation of the forest tradition monks is a reminder to us in scaling down excessive infatuation with material possessions and unbridled human greed – trends set in by the neo-capitalist market policies and consumerism. Today's consumerist culture is characterized by the trend of material indulgence more than the practice of moderation. And so although life has become comfortable, it has not resulted in an increase of true happiness and genuine satisfaction. Most people are discontent, prone to extravagance, obsessed with consumption and heedless to the benefits of cultivation of contentment. In this context, it is worth taking a look at the lifestyle of the forest tradition monks whose selfless renunciation has given rise to moderation in living and cultivation of contentment leading to lasting happiness. The cultivation of contentment is indispensable for the maintenance of optimum moral growth and ethical standards in any society. Cultivation of true contentment leads to a clean separation of the two contradictory tendencies namely, desires for true quality of life and temptations to fulfil artificial desires, and prepares the ground for the establishment of the former. As the scholar-monk, PA Payutto puts it, "Contentment understood correctly means cutting off the artificial desire for sense-pleasure but actively encouraging and supporting the desire for quality of life. In Buddhism, contentment is always paired with effort. The purpose of contentment is seen to be to save the time, and energy lost in ministering to selfish desires, and using it to create and nurture true well-being" (Payutto, P.A., 1994: 33).

The message of non-clinging of the forest tradition monks is a panacea for the world steeped in the quagmire of growing discontentment. The forest tradition monks 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.

The lesson of the forest tradition monks' deconstruction of the ego is useful to end linguistic bickerings, racial prejudices and religious disputes that have bred uncanny hatred, jealousy, vain pride, suspicion, contempt, subjugation and misuse of power among different groups of people. To sustain the reality of hybridity and multiculturalism that are characteristic traits of today's world of globalization, the deconstruction of the individual ego is indispensable. The experiences of colonialism and the two world wars have shown that vain pride in one's racial and cultural origins gives rise to hatred and contemptuous disregard for other cultures and people outside

one's own community leading to untold miseries and pain and disruption of unity and harmonious co-existence. When the principle of deconstruction of the ego is put into real practice, it helps to replace parochialism and jingoistic tendencies with loving-kindness and compassion towards others and fosters a more receptive world view which is based on tolerance, impartiality, fairness and egalitarianism. With a kind and compassionate mental disposition one can learn to accept and celebrate differences among groups of people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. While teaching his ordained disciples from different countries and diverse 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."

The forest tradition monks' practice of compassion is an inspiring example. Attempts should be made to cultivate such a positive value for the happy and harmonious co-existence of all and for successful implementation of eco-friendly projects that can positively affect the flourishing of not the human race alone but also animals and plants. Such attempts can restore a balance in the eco-system which has long suffered from ravages of human greed and selfish motives. Unmindful plundering of nature has led to massive deforestation and extinction of wide range of animal species. When trees are felled and animals are poached, greedy minds look at nature as a domain that can be conquered and plundered endlessly. Churning short-term benefits from natural resources human beings fail to see themselves as an integral part of the eco-system. But with the cultivation of a compassionate outlook, one comes to recognize and value interdependence of lives on earth. Thus a tree along the road side is not seen as a log of wood that can be chopped off at one's will, but is considered a home to birds, insects, worms and a shady shelter for a weary traveler. Compassion to all living being leads to non-confrontation and harmony – harmony with oneself and with one's fellow beings and surrounding. Therefore, the cultivation of this great quality leads to eco-friendly consciousness and preservation of forests and nature as is witnessed in the case of each of the forest monasteries founded by the *thudanga* monks where resident monks live in harmony and contemplative quietude in the midst of nature.

At the mundane or physical level, our reflective understanding of the forest monks' internalization of non-substantiality or *anattā* is indispensable to protect the world from rising terrorist activities and highly sophisticated future warfare that might wipe out the entire human civilization from the surface of the earth. At the supra mundane level, reflective understanding of *anattā* in day to day life leads to blissful contemplation and makes life worth-living. As Luangpho Chah says, "Our lives are like the breath, like the growing and falling leaves. When we can really understand about falling leaves, we can sweep the paths every day and have great happiness in our lives on this changing earth".

The forest tradition monks are role models for us in regards to their unwavering moral standpoint. If such a moral standpoint is not cultivated, it would be rather difficult to train our 'monkey' minds (equipped with ever more sophisticated

technology) and to reduce crimes, corruptions, exploitations and misuse of power. The wheel of human progress can acquire a balanced momentum only when moral values are established on a firm footing. The defilements – greed, hatred and delusion – are at the root of all suffering and selfishness. The forest tradition monks have taught their numerous followers to learn to overcome, conquer and go beyond these defilements. Luangpho Chah says, “The defilements are like a tiger. We should imprison the tiger in a good strong cage made of mindfulness, energy, patience, and endurance. Then we can let it starve to death by not feeding its habitual desires.”

The type of mindfulness that the forest tradition monks have attained 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. Through the cultivation of mindfulness a holistic world view can be developed. As has been pointed out by Luangpho Chah, “When you pick mushrooms to eat, you do not do so blindly; you have to know which kind is which. So too with our practice – we must know the dangers, the snake’s bite of defilements, in order to free ourselves from them. Everyone has defilements in his practice. We must work with them, struggling when they arise. This is not something to think about but to do. Much patience is necessary. Gradually we have to change our habitual ways of thinking and feeling. We must see how we suffer when we think in terms of *me* and *mine*. Then we can let go.”

Conclusion

The forest tradition monks possessed great mastery in using the ascetic discipline to teach their ordained disciples and lay followers to confront and work directly with their own problems of greed, judgment, hatred and ignorance. Their direct and simple teachings always turn their followers back to their own minds, the source and the root of all trouble. Their 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 self at work. All the forest tradition monks 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 likes and dislikes. Once this state can be achieved all binary opposition get automatically collapsed at the same time leading to no more creation of ‘mega-narratives’.

The dhamma of the forest tradition is down-to-earth, but yet difficult to realize and understand when the mind is ceaselessly caught up in the quagmire of defilements

and heedlessness to defilements. It requires moment-to-moment self-scrutiny and mindful practice of ‘letting go’. In this form of empirical-deconstruction which involves conscientious and mindful teasing apart of all binary oppositions and releasing from their bindings, there is no room for *aporia* or conflictual and conceptual hiatus. The forest tradition monks, even though not philosophers in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless, 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 asceticism in tandem. It can be concluded that the ‘deconstructive’ tool through which the monks from the forest tradition 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 to solving numerous problems encompassing such diverse states and situations as psychological, environmental, and economic.

References

- Anguttara-nikaya*. PTS edition.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1992). *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Jaware, Aniket. (2001). *Simplifications*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Lt.
- Kornfield, Jack and Breiter, Paul ed. (1985). *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*. Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House.
- Magliola, Robert. (1984). *Derrida on the Mend*. Purdue University Press.
- Mahasi Sayadaw. (1996). *The Great Discourse on Not Self (Anattālakkhana Sutta)*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation. *Majjhima-nikaya*. PTS edition.
- Payutto, P.A. (1995). *Buddhadhamma*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Payutto, P.A. (1994). *Buddhist Economics*. Bangkok: The National Identity Board.
- Rahula, Walpole. (1990). *What the Buddha Taught* Bangkok: Haw Trai Foundation.