Leesa S. Davis

Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism

Deconstructive Modes of Spiritual Inquiry

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In Memoriam

Patricia Mary Davis
1930–1987

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Abbreviations and Conventions

Bṛ. UB.	Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣadbhāṣya
Bṛ. Up.	Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BSB	Brahmasūtrabhāṣya
Ch. Up.	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
GK	Kārikās on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad a.k.a. the Gauḍapādīya-kārikā
Laṇkā	Laṇkāvatāra Sūtra
MMK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikās
Mu. Up.	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
Upad.	Upadeśasāhasrī
Vajra	Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra

C.	Chinese
J.	Japanese
K.	Korean
Skt.	Sanskrit

Conventions

For reasons of consistency, all Chinese names and terms have been rendered into pinyin transliteration. Chinese names in book and article titles remain as published.

In all dialogues the teacher's name is given once in square brackets, e.g. [*Ramana Maharshi*], and thereafter identified by the initial of the first name, e.g., [*R*]. All questioners are first referred to as '[*Student*]' and '[*S*]' thereafter.

Every attempt has been made to use non-discriminatory language; however the use of masculine pronouns in the classical dialogues has not been changed because in these traditions spiritual seekers were almost always male. In modern and contemporary dialogues where the name is given or known, corresponding

male or female pronouns are used. In all other cases, male and female pronouns are alternated or, whenever possible, plurals are used.

Introduction

Experiential Deconstructive Inquiry

What is the knowledge by which I may find my true nature?
Spiritual Aspirant to Śaṅkara[1]

Spiritual practice is, above all, an experiential journey. Upon beginning this journey, a spiritual aspirant, to a greater or lesser degree, enters into a potentially life-changing engagement with a tradition, a teacher, and a practice. This engagement reflects one of the most powerful notions in religion: the idea that spiritual practice can lead to an experience of insight or a 'knowledge', which, in its profoundest aspect, can bring about a hitherto unknown or unrealized relationship to self and world.

The two traditions that this study will consider – the Upaniṣadic tradition of Advaita Vedānta, emanating from the seventh- to eighth-century Indian sage Śaṅkara, and the Buddhist path of Zen (C. Chan), especially the Sōtō practice lineage emanating from the thirteenth-century Japanese Master Eihei Dōgen, both of which are now widely practised in the West – offer forms of spiritual inquiry that, it is claimed, can lead a practitioner to liberating realization of the 'true nature' of self and world.

According to Advaita and Zen philosophies, reality is fundamentally unconditioned and non-dual in nature, and that realization of this 'true nature' of things is the aim and goal of human life. As a corollary to this, both traditions claim that our ordinary dualistic way of experiencing the world does not give us true or direct knowledge of 'the nature of things', as our experience of reality is somehow distorted or filtered by conditions and structures that we falsely identify with reality itself.

To this end, a common instruction of Zen masters and Advaitin sages is the admonishment to 'look directly', and in many respects the entire spiritual endeavour in these traditions appears to hinge on this: that is, for the student to remove, or at least lessen, the distortions, filters and various kinds of conditionings through which he or she normally views the world. Both maintain

that if their instructions are carried out then delusion in the form of misplaced identification will be overcome and the insight will be 'direct', that is, free from conditioning factors and outside of dualistic structures.

Following this, the key question for the spiritual aspirant is 'How?' and it is the 'how' of these practice traditions that we will explore here. If, as these traditions claim, our 'everyday' dualistic structures of being and knowing do not give us 'true' knowledge, what must we do to see through them or remove them? 'What is the knowledge or what is the method by which I may find my true nature?' 'What do I have to know and what do I have to do?'

Taking the perspective of the questioning student, the above questions will be asked of Advaita and Zen masters and texts with the aim of exploring the liberative logic and semantic power of Advaita and Zen teachings and instructions through the experiential impact on the student. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to clarify how language and other communicative techniques are used in selected spiritual practices of Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism and how the boundaries and barriers of conceptual thought and personal dualistic experiencing are subverted, reconfigured and experientially deconstructed to disclose a purported non-dual knowing that both traditions claim is somehow innate but unrecognized.

Both Advaita and Zen make the claim that spiritual awakening does not involve 'adding anything new' to the practitioner's experience. Both claim that there is nothing to be attained or gained from spiritual practice but, nevertheless, both traditions also claim that there is a fundamental non-dual realization as to the 'nature of things' that is obscured or mistaken by the 'everyday' dualistic structures that we live by. Hence, the dualistic thought processes and dichotomizing habits that are unrecognized in the practitioner's 'commonsense' 'everyday' experiencing must be recognized and 'seen through' in a process of 'experiential undoing' of the thought-constructed unquestioned dualistic assumptions which, according to these traditions, cause seekers to objectify and reify reality. In this sense, both spiritual paths, in practice, can be read as offering forms of deconstructive spiritual inquiry designed to recognize, work with, and overcome in significant ways the mediated or constructed quality of human experience and ascriptions. In both traditions, 'authentic' being and 'real' knowing are intimately related and are claimed to be disclosed through engagement with a spiritual practice.

In this context, the Advaita and Zen experiential spiritual quest can be said to be similarly framed. Both traditions posit an ontological quest through epistemological investigations based on a theory of error. That is, the core operational assumption of both traditions is that our experience of reality is obscured or hindered by conditioned ontological boundaries and epistemological

filters that we habitually mistake for reality itself. Hence, the 'goal' of spiritual practice in these traditions is to disclose these mistaken ontological and epistemological categories to the practitioner and to 'undo', 'see through' or deconstruct erroneous ontological objectifications and epistemic reifications that obscure or distort what tradition claims to be 'reality-as-it-is'.

Although Advaita and Zen launch their respective 'reality-as-it-is' on differing ontologies, in the deconstructive meditative inquiries that Sōtō Zen and Advaita Vedānta advocate the key dualistic barriers and dichotomized conceptual categories that spiritual aspirants struggle with fall under the same general headings: self and other (subject and object), ends and means (cause and effect) and linear dualistic conceptions of space and time. In the course of this study, we shall examine how these deconstructive practices are taught in Zen and Advaita, and how unquestioned adherence to these dualistic constructs are thrown into question in the personal experiencing of the practitioner and experientially undone.

It should be noted, and will become clear in the course of our discussion, that this study does not address philosophical deconstruction in the French sense but rather identifies a process of experiential deconstruction in certain Buddhist and Hindu non-dual philosophies and practice instructions. This mode of deconstruction targets dualistic frames of being and knowing and is ignited via certain non-dual spiritual practices that aim to 'undo', or at least lessen, dualistic either/or structures that, according to these traditions, obscure our direct experience of 'things as they are'.

What is proposed here is to carefully consider the practice instructions given by Zen and Advaita texts and teachers and the accompanying exchanges with students offered in these spiritual traditions, with the aim of clarifying the liberative intent and deconstructive implications of such instructions in relationship to the core doctrinal and philosophical tenets of each tradition. In this way, possible distinctions in approach and technique between various deconstructive spiritual strategies can be identified and the experiential dynamics of the deconstructive process can be approached. As stated above, the experiential impact of these teachings will be explored from the viewpoint of the questioning student as the nature of the questions generated are indicative of the key dualistic constructions that have to be experientially undone.

The point here is that the well-known 'paradoxical' and 'puzzling' statements and practice instructions of Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta will yield to a fuller exploration of their meaning and dynamics if the experiential dimension is taken into account. In other words, in examining the experiential tensions, existential doubts and (often) radical questioning that manifests in the experience of the student when confronted by these 'paradoxical' and 'puzzling' statements

and instructions, we can begin to identify the conditioned structures that the student is struggling against and a window on the inner logic and workings of these practices may be opened. For example, such instructions as Chan master Hongzhi Zhengjue's[2] 'simply drop off everything' (Hongzhi, 1991, p. 10) and a contemporary Advaita practitioner's description of his spiritual practice as the 'practice of no practice' (InterviewDO2, 2002) can appear to be either facile advice or mere word games if the master's non-dual deconstructive liberative intent and the student's dualistic doubts and difficulties are not taken into account.

To such statements and instructions the questions that this book asks is not only 'What do they mean?' but also, and perhaps more importantly, 'What are they doing?' and what happens in the experiential worlds of practitioners as a result. To explore Advaita and Zen deconstructive spiritual practices in this way, a multi-dimensional methodological approach that opens an analytical window on the experience of practitioners is needed: an approach that is flexible enough to identify and trace the experiential trajectory of practice, and precise enough to allow critical appraisal of the phenomenological data with some philosophical accuracy.

The primary method of experiential data collection for this study was participant-observation fieldwork in which I actively took part in Advaita and Zen practice communities for over three years: going on intensive practice retreats; attending teachings and public talks; interviewing teachers and practitioners; and, in the case of Zen, receiving a commentary from a contemporary Zen teacher especially for this research. This approach placed me in a dynamic insider/outsider position in which maintaining awareness of a shifting sense of active participation versus critical overview was extremely important.[3] For this reason, the observed material was not rigorously classified until the participant-observation stage of the research was completed and some distance from the practice situation was attained. This distance, coupled with careful analysis of the philosophical underpinnings and master–student dialogues from foundational and contemporary Advaita and Zen texts, served as a check and balance to the phenomenological data collected in 'live' practice situations.

To explore the 'how' of these practice traditions from the viewpoint of the questioning student, we are thus working within two frameworks: the spiritual methods or practices of tradition and the investigative methodologies of research. To take both these frameworks into account, and to be able to move conceptually between them, the most suitable methodological approach proved to be heuristic in design and transpersonal in orientation. In addition to this, to analyse the 'live' experiential material gathered in practitioner interviews with

more philosophical precision, a hermeneutical-phenomenological strategy was also developed and employed in part two of this study.[4]

Briefly, heuristic research design offers a methodological framework that can both parallel and critically appraise the liberative spiritual methods (practice) of Advaita and Zen, as it centres on qualitative methods and 'seeks to obtain qualitative depictions that are at the heart and depths of … experience' in which the investigator '… gathers detailed descriptions, direct quotations, and case documentations … [that] enable the researcher to derive the raw material of knowledge and experience from the empirical world' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 38).

Furthermore, heuristic inquiry provides appropriate conceptual tools for entering into the more intuitive, experiential frameworks of spiritual methods in the sense that the concerns and procedures of heuristic research and spiritual methods interface and overlap in many key areas. In heuristic inquiry, the researcher immerses him- or herself in active experience and works through experiential and analytical stages such as self-dialogue, tacit knowing, focusing, and inner attention, all of which parallel the kind of engagement, attention and intention that is required of a spiritual practitioner. In spiritual practice, the 'workshop' is one's own self; while one can never 'get inside' another person's experiencing, the need to recognize the phenomenal world of the experiencing persons is an important orientation to any empirical investigation that works towards understanding and explicating experiential data in a philosophical framework.

Engaging with a spiritual practice in which previously unquestioned dualistic structures and overlays are thrown into question involves 'shifts' or 'movements' in the practitioner's internal frames of experiencing; here, a transpersonal orientation is useful for identifying the shifts in awareness that practitioners report. Based on studies of meditative awareness by transpersonal theorists Valle and Mohs (1998, pp. 100–101), eight key characteristics of transpersonal awareness that are 'often recognized in the practice of meditation' were realigned for the purposes of this study from the perspective of non-duality that is central to both Advaita and Zen practice and philosophies. These non-dual characteristics were identified directly from foundational texts and contemporary practitioner reports and, for conceptual purposes, are representative of the kind of shifts that practitioners experience. The eight non-dual characteristics of meditative awareness are:

1 The stillpoint of being: I am not this or that, I simply *am*.
2. All-accepting compassion: Things *are* perfect and complete just as they *are*.
3. Pure Being: Subject–object dichotomy dissolves.

4. Dissolution of spatial boundaries: Being is all-space.
5. Dissolution of categories of time: There is only Now.
6. Non-dual knowledge: Immediate knowing.
7. Non-dual action: Direct action without premeditation or consequence.
8. Deconstruction of constructed conceptions of self and world.

These qualities or characteristics of meditative awareness highlight the multi-dimensionality of meditative experience and provide a useful framework for isolating and analysing the static dualistic conceptual structures that deconstructive spiritual practice throws into question and experientially 'undoes'.

It should be noted that the key non-dual characteristics of meditative awareness and the phases of heuristic inquiry are considered separately for analytical purposes; in the actual practice situation they are interlinked and presuppose each other.

This study naturally falls into two parts. Part one, 'Foundational Philosophies and Spiritual Methods', outlines the foundational philosophical tenets and spiritual methods (practices) of tradition and identifies their deconstructive thrust. This is done by examining teacher–student dialogues in traditional sources and contemporary teachings in each tradition, and hermeneutically clarifying and explicating the deconstructing or 'undoing' of the student's unquestioned dualistic experiencing structures (ontological and epistemological).

The second part of this study, 'Deconstructive Techniques and Dynamics of Experiential Undoing', builds on the above by first identifying four deconstructive techniques common to both traditions, and second, phenomenologically exploring the dynamics of such 'experiential undoing' through the reported experience of actual cases of contemporary Advaita and Zen practitioners. By mapping practitioners' reported practice experience against the philosophical underpinnings of tradition we can see these experientially deconstructive philosophies 'in action' in contemporary practice situations and gain some insight into the shifts in worldviews that these practices ignite.

In chapter one, 'Non-duality in Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism', the respective ontological orientations of Zen and Advaita are described and compared and their experiential modes of approach to spiritual insight (meditative inquiry, questioning, and dialoguing) are outlined. The discussion goes on to offer preliminarily descriptions of the undoing or deconstruction of dualistic conceptions in Advaita and Zen spiritual inquiry. The approach here is broad and the discussion general, with the aim of laying the foundations for the more in-depth analysis of the traditions in chapters two and three and the more phenomenological thrust of part two.

Chapters two and three, 'Advaita Vedānta: Philosophical Foundations and Deconstructive Strategies' and 'Zen Buddhism: Philosophical Foundations and Deconstructive Strategies', deal directly with the foundational philosophical tenets and spiritual methods employed in the practice traditions of Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism. In keeping with the emphasis on the experiential impact of these teachings, these chapters take an 'old masters' approach to tradition wherein the reported spiritual experience of lineage founders and key teachers is shown to be paradigmatic for the practice tradition that follows. Thus, the line of inquiry taken here focuses on the individual experiential aspects of spiritual practice and its relationship to doctrine rather than the more community-based collective expressions of Advaita and Zen practice.[5] In this context, the core non-dual teachings and key philosophical tenets of each tradition are outlined from traditional source texts and presented 'in action' through the teacher–student exchanges of lineage founders. The teachings of modern and contemporary Advaita and Zen are also presented through teacher–student exchanges that highlight their links to, and points of divergence from, key traditional teachings.

In part two, four key deconstructive techniques are identified, described and analysed in the context of the practice situation. Following this, the dynamics of deconstructive practice experience are explored. Central to the exploration of the dynamic process(es) of deconstructive spiritual inquiry in part two is the need to posit a suitable conceptual framework in which practitioners' reported experiential data can be explored and mapped against the liberative claims of tradition.

To this end, working from the perspective of the experiential impact of these teachings, and 'suspended' (as it were) between the insider and outsider positions, a hermeneutical-phenomenological strategy is employed that reads Advaita and Zen teacher–student exchanges as a dialectic between the two levels of reality or the 'two truths' that are a philosophical mainstay of each tradition. The absolute non-dual standpoint (*pāramārthika*) of the teacher and the relative dualistic standpoint of the pupil (*vyavahāra*) are shown to be a shifting dynamic in which the student is pushed to different levels of understanding until finally the idea of levels or understandings dissolves. This strategy also brings to light how Advaita and Zen masters employ the two truths as a deconstructive device to expose the interplay and ultimate non-duality between opposites and dichotomies.

In addition to this, a standard Indian philosophical 'formula,' found in both Buddhist and Advaita dialogues – the four-cornered negation or tetralemma – is identified as a deconstructive rubric that is employed to shift the practitioner into a non-dual experiential 'space' in which seemingly contradictory assertions can coexist in the practitioner's awareness without apparent contradiction.

Through the above analytical approach we can then identify practitioners' reported experiential deconstructive 'shifts' or 'openings' in awareness as movement into a non-dual 'space' in which experiential undoing unfolds and an attempt to integrate the philosophical, observational and phenomenological data in a description and analysis of the dynamics of deconstructive spiritual inquiry and the phenomenology of experiential undoing.

Chapter four, 'Four Deconstructive Techniques Common to Both Traditions', outlines the techniques of deconstructive spiritual inquiry by discussing the practice situation and the role of the teacher in Advaita and Zen. Four key deconstructive techniques that are common to both traditions are then identified and described. These are:

1. unfindability analysis;
2. bringing everything back to the here and now;
3. paradoxical problems;
4. negation.

This chapter utilizes the above described heuristic analytical framework to show how these techniques are employed, individually and in combination, in Advaita and Zen practice instructions and in the context of teacher–student dialogues. These deconstructive 'moves' are then related to the core philosophical tenets of each tradition as explicated in chapters two and three. To this end, emphasis is placed on showing how these deconstructive techniques are wielded to expose previously unquestioned inconsistencies in the structures of the practitioner's personal experiencing and how they are 'worked' to experientially undo key conceptual dualisms of self and other (subject and object), ends and means (cause and effect), and linear dualistic conceptions of space and time to instigate the process of experiential undoing; that is, the experiential deconstructive 'shift' or 'movement' in the *actual* experience of the practitioner.

Chapter five, 'Dynamics of Experiential Undoing', employs a hermeneutical-phenomenological strategy to parallel practitioners' experiential reports (empirical study) with philosophical analysis. That is, the reported experiential impact of these deconstructive practices is phenomenologically 'mapped' against the key philosophical and experiential tenets of tradition and previously identified deconstructive 'moves' of Zen and Advaita teachers, with the aim of making some observations on the similarities and differences in each tradition's approach and unpacking the deconstructive dynamics that underlie the process.

To this end, chapter five expands on the previous chapter's analysis of the practice situation and the techniques of deconstructive spiritual inquiry by

attempting to describe the process of experiential undoing and its underlying dynamics. This description proceeds in two ways. First, experiential 'shifts' or 'movements' reported by practitioners are posited as a phenomenological 'space' in which experiential undoing unfolds. To enable a more rigorous entry into the experiential dynamics two key non-dual categories, the Advaitin 'empty moment' between thought and thought and the Zen 'turning space' of 'non-thinking' (*hishiryō*) previously identified from the dialogues and practice instructions in chapters two and three are used as a rubric to map practitioners' experiential reports of moving into non-dual awareness.

Secondly, the philosophical, observational and phenomenological data are integrated by mapping the reported experiential impact of deconstructive spiritual inquiry on two veteran Advaita and Zen practitioners against the key philosophical tenets of tradition and previously identified deconstructive strategies employed by teachers. Aside from highlighting differences and similarities in the deconstructive dynamics, the multi-dimensional nature of this mapping aims to bring the intra-psychic dynamics of the ontological shifts that these practices generate for practitioners into relief and thereby gain some insight into the transformation of identity and worldview that practitioners experience.

The study concludes by summarizing the differences and highlighting the similarities in each tradition's use of deconstructive techniques. What comes to the surface is that despite their almost diametrically opposed ontologies, the deconstructive point in both traditions is that the choice between any dichotomous pairing (doing/not-doing, self/other and so on) is only binding as long as there is attachment to either/or patterns of thought. Once the attachment to either/or patterns of thought that support dichotomous epistemic framings and objectified ontologies is weakened, the seeming contradictions of non-dual understandings dissolve. Furthermore, when the diametrically opposed ontologies of Zen and Advaita are viewed in a dialectical relationship based on their shared deconstructive techniques and dualistic 'targets', the phenomenology of experiential shifts into non-dual awareness exhibit striking similarities.

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Part One

Foundational Philosophies and Spiritual Methods

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