
Supplement and Suchness in Deconstruction and Buddhism

*Sung-ja Han**

Abstract

In recent years we have heard many ambiguous notions about deconstruction and Derrida, among other similar, vaguely defined concepts such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis etc. But if we have an idea of their critique of the subject as a unitary and originating consciousness as well as critique of authority for meaning and truth, then the question arises if there is any similarity between recent western philosophical thoughts and Buddhism. In this context the aim of the present paper is to review some concepts of deconstruction and to reflect upon them from the viewpoint of Buddhism.

At first deconstruction's concept of 'non-presence' is confronted with the 'impermanence' concept of Buddhism. 'Non-presence' of deconstruction denies the presence, because the things regarded as the presence in our consciousness are in fact different from the things themselves and are 'later arrived'. Meanwhile the 'impermanence' concept of Buddhism understands that everything in the world is impermanent, because their existences are dependent on their conditions and last only one moment. It means there can be no permanent substance. Now at the very starting point of each reflection of 'non-presence' and 'impermanence' we can see an undeniable difference between them. The issue of deconstruction is the possibility of our true consciousness, that is, the coincidence of the things with our consciousness. The question about the existence of the things is not its concern. On the contrary the concept of impermanence is an alternative to an existential question about the existence of everything. The key to the solution is the doctrine of 'dependent co-arising', in which everything is dependent upon conditions and can not exist permanently. If all phenomena come to be in dependence upon other conditions, so the movement of their dependence goes on further, ad infinitum. The infinite process is similar to the state of 'dissemination' of deconstruction, which describes a

* Ph.D. Candidate, Buddhist Studies / Dongguk University

movement from signifier to signifier in the linguistic system. It denies the constant meaning of signified, it is, the positive entities of signified. Also confirmed by the concept of 'différance', there are only infinite movement of signifiers in the linguistic system and the divergent meaning of signified. Eventually the denying of positive entities and the constant meaning of signified mean the denying of the subject, who is supposed as the owner of the text. But now in Buddhist thought lecture any negation as well as affirmation is regarded as perverted views. The best way of thinking is to see it as it is. So the consciousness of the self exists, or does not exist, according to the conditions.

The concept of supplement is considered as a conclusion of Derrida's reflection, which gives the priority of writing over speaking. The denying of the presence, positive entities and consciousness affirms the act of infinite writing, endless supplement to speaking, which is regarded as an origin, presence of consciousness. But it is still based on dualism as well as logocentrism, which gives priority to speaking. According to the Buddhism any kind of discrimination is also a perversion. Only 'Suchness' alone can be free from the perverted knowledge. The self exists, or does not exist.

I. Deconstruction

1. 'Speech' and Illusion of Presence

A. Presence

Western philosophers from Socrates to Husserl have searched for an ultimate truth, in the belief that the existence of the world and of human being has a meaning. The concepts, which will give meaning to existence, include God, idea, self, entity, essence, substance, etc. This attitude of the transcendental belief can be called logocentrism, i.e. concerned with the 'words', on which all our thoughts and mental activities are based. This logocentrism contains also a specific aspect that the spoken words are regarded as prior to written words. The assumption of the presence is the reason for that, and it has a long tradition in the history of western philosophy.

For both Husserl and Saussure, on whose thoughts Derrida's theory of writing is based, speech is seen as being in direct contact with meaning. Words come out from the speaker as the direct signs of his present thought, while writing consists of physical signs that are separated from the thought,

from the origin. The physical signs lie in great danger of ambiguity and in rhetoric artificiality in the absence of the speaker. As the function of writing is accomplished without a speaker, it may result in uncertain access to a thought. Writing thus implies the danger of distortion of speech. So in *Phaedrus* Plato condemns writing as a perverted form of communication, separated from the moment of origin. In the absence of the speaker writing can produce all sorts of misunderstandings.

But in the moment of speech the case is different. Unlike writing, which is inevitably mediated, speech is linked to the presence, so the meaning seems to be almost transferred. Speech implies immediacy and transparency of the meaning. For this reason speech has priority over writing. Derrida calls it phonocentrism, and his attempt to deconstruct the opposition between speech and writing is linked to the uncovering of the metaphysics of presence as a whole.

In his reflection about the presence Derrida starts with the process of our experience of the outside world. Building on Freud's theory he claims that our immediate experience is not a direct contact with the outside world but an indirect contact with what has already been unconsciously inscribed in the memory. This inscription is a fundamental script of hieroglyphics written upon the matter of the brain. Such a script as 'arche-writing' precedes all writings. (R. Harland, 1987 : 142)

Thus our perceptual images and impressions are no more than the kind of perceptual images and impressions that we get from things. Our perception about the things is continuously divided from the presence of 'the things themselves'. What we perceive as things is different from them.

Also perception can never happen at the same time as the contact of our senses with the outside world. Our perception comes inevitably later to the 'now' of our own experience. The result is that the presence is already marked by difference and deferral. What we thought as presence is disclosed as what is different from origin and later arrived. As Derrida says, we must "think the present starting from in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral" (J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1976: 166).

The notion of presence and of the present is derived as an effect of differences. Thus we should come "to posit presence... no longer as the absolute matrix form of being, but rather as a 'particularization' and 'effect'. A determination and effect within a system that is no longer that of presence but of difference." (J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, 1973: 147)

The phenomenological concept of the presence, which is related to the

phenomenological concept of 'the things themselves', is deconstructed as an illusion by Derrida. If the presence itself does not exist in our consciousness, then it cannot be true that the speech is closer to the presence and prior to the writing.

B. Dissemination

After the destruction of the assumption of presence, Derrida's theory of writing takes a next step into Saussure's theory of signs. The common view of the language is that language consists of words, which as positive entities build a system and are related to each other. It is Saussure who brought an end to this transcendental belief. For him signs are the product of a system of differences. He argues that signs are arbitrary and conventional, so they cannot be defined as positive entities. They can be defined only by the differences, which distinguish them from each other. (J. Culler, 1982 : 98) Therefore a language is thought of as a system of differences. "In the linguistic system there are only differences, without positive terms." (F. de Saussure, 1960: 120)

Through his analysis of the language as a system with no positive terms, Saussure makes a powerful critique against logocentrism. But when he assumes the possibility of grasping signifieds, in order to distinguish one sign from another, he explicitly affirms a logocentric conception of the sign. Thus he gives priority to the signifieds over the signifiers, whose function is then only to designate the signifieds, the meaning of the signs. The concept of the sign is thus involved within the basic concepts of logocentrism, which is committed to a belief in the ultimate meaning of words and thoughts. It is confirmed when he excludes the written word from his linguistic analysis: "the object of linguistic analysis is not defined by the combination of the written word and the spoken word: the spoken word alone constitutes the object" (F. de Saussure, 1960: 23-24).

But now Derrida, following on from Saussure's theory of language with no entities, arrives at a different conclusion. He argues that meaning is not immediately present in a sign. In Saussure's conception, the signifier designates the signified, and the signified represents a terminus where meaning comes to a halt. But in Derrida's conception, the movement of signifier is not toward signified, but toward another signifier. One signifier points away to another signifier, which in turn points away to another signifier, so this process goes on further, ad infinitum. Consequently meaning is scattered along the whole system of signifiers. Thus the meaning

cannot come to a halt, but it is infinite implication.

“The meaning of meaning ... is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier... its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own economy so that it always signifies again and differs.” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978: 25)

Derrida describes this state of language as a state of dissemination. There are endless signified meanings, which are perpetually unfulfilled in the absence of all signifieds. It is signifiers that are fundamental in Derrida's theory, because there is only a movement from signifier to signifier in the linguistic system. Writing exists only in terms of spatially independent signifiers. (R. Harland, 1987 : 135)

By removing the signified, Derrida denies the human control over language. In the absence of all signifieds, language gets its own mobility and creativity. In dissemination, language is beyond the social responsibility and reveals its anarchical and unpredictable potency.

C. Différance

As we have seen above, in their movement from one signifier to another, the existence of signifiers can be identified only through their relation. It is not certain elements of positive entities which constitutes the linguistic system. The system consists only of differences between the signifiers. In the linguistic system there are only differences.

Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each 'element'-phoneme or grapheme- is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.(J. Derrida, 1981 : 26)

It is with a specially invented term 'différance' that Derrida elaborates the concept of differences. Différance is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition of presence and absence. Différance is the systematic play of differences, of traces and of the spacing, by which elements relate to one another. Based on the French verb 'différer' Derrida distinguishes two aspects to Différance:

"On the one hand, [différer] indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until "later" what is presently denied." (J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, 1973: 129)

Thus, besides the apparent meaning of differ, 'différer' means also defer or put off. Derrida clarifies his concept by using as an example the word 'pharmakon' in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The Greek word 'pharmakon' can mean both 'poison' and 'remedy'. When Plato applies it to writing, he seems to condemn writing as a 'poison'. But Derrida does not exclude its other meaning of 'remedy'. He argues that "the word pharmakon is caught in a chain of significations... [which] is not, simply, that of the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato." (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 1981: 95)

For Derrida, Plato's text says two quite divergent things about writing, simultaneously and undecidable. The meaning 'poison' exists not merely due to its difference from the meaning 'remedy', but also its deferring of the meaning 'remedy'. The deferred meaning is put off only for the present and in time it will be active again. (R. Harland : 138)

"Like any text, the text of 'Plato' could not be involved, at least in a virtual, dynamic, lateral manner, with all the words that composed the system of the Greek language. Certain forces of association unite... the words 'actually present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system, whether or not they appear as 'words'." (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 1981: 129-130)

The writer cannot choose the meaning of his words, but he can only find it, as they are already established in the system of each language. Derrida admits, "before me, the signifier on its own says more than I believe that I meant to say, and in relation to it, my meaning-to-say is submissive rather than active (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978: 178)". Signifiers written in a paper are solid and enduring, so they do not need the presence of the author and of his or her consciousness. Writing represents the passage of thought out of consciousness. (*Ibid.*, 128)

2. Writing and Supplement

Through his concepts of différance and dissemination, Derrida destructs the illusion of consciousness and confirms the absence of the signified. But

his attempt does not stop to reverse the position of signifier and signified. It goes further to change the priority of speaking over writing. His argument is based on the two main characters of the writing, the iterability and supplement.

If we think about fundamental conditions of the signs, iterability is one of them. If a sequence of sounds is repeatable, then it can function as a signifier. It applies not only to writing but also to all linguistic signs. And in this respect nothing can be better qualified as writing.

"If 'writing' means inscription and especially the durable instituting of signs (and this is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), then writing in general covers the entire domain of linguistic signs... The very idea of institution, hence of the arbitrariness of the sign, is unthinkable prior to or outside the horizon of writing". (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1976: 44)

Furthermore as a most durable sign, writing substitutes memory. By virtue of writing there is no need to keep memory. "Writing, a mnemotechnic means, supplanting good memory, spontaneous memory, signifies forgetfulness... its violence befalls the soul as unconsciousness." (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1976: 44)

The function of supplement, which is another character of writing, is actually not a merit but a fault. So when Rousseau said "writing serves only as a supplement to speech", it is because, for him "languages are made to be spoken" (Culler, 1982: 102). The supplement means, on the one hand, an inessential extra, added to something, which is complete in itself, but on the other hand, it is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack. So the original one, which is presumed complete, is at the same time incomplete, so long it is supplemented.

On the ground of this notion Derrida argues that writing can be added to speech only if speech is not self-sufficient, only if there is already a lack in speech that needs to be supplemented by writing. Writing can be added to speech, only because speech is already marked by the qualities, which are generally attributed to writing: absence and misunderstanding. (Culler : 103) As Derrida notes writing can be secondary and derivative "only on one condition: that the 'original', 'natural' etc. language never existed, was never intact or untouched by writing, that it has itself always been a writing" (*Of grammatology*, 56). There is always a lack, an ordinary lack in speaking.

In autobiography the experience of the writer is conceived on the model of the text, as for example in the *Confessions* of Rousseau. There he said, "the

decision I have taken to write and to hide myself is precisely the one that suits me. If I were present people would never have known what I was worth" (Culler, 1982: 103). Here Derrida's reflection is confirmed, namely that presence is always deferred, and that supplementation is possible only because of an ordinary lack. Our experience needs to be supplemented and what lies outside are more supplements, chains of supplements. For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing.

II. Buddhism and Deconstruction

1. 'Impermanence' and 'Non-Presence'

Now I should like to attempt to review the theory of deconstruction from the viewpoint of Buddhism. At first the deconstruction's concepts of 'non-presence' will be confronted with the 'impermanent' concept of Buddhism and the concepts of 'dissemination' and 'defférant' with 'dependent co-arising'.

The thought of impermanence in Buddhism can be regarded as the counterpart to the concept of non-presence in deconstruction. According to the three cardinal characteristics of Dharmas, everything in the world is in their own-being impermanent, ill and non-self. They are dependent on certain conditions and last only one moment. The coming and going of the things is dependent upon conditions not its own. The things do not show a trace of any eternally enduring substances. None are considered to stand outside the universal law of 'dependent co-arising'. If everything comes to be in dependence upon other conditions, then there can be no 'Self', 'soul', 'consciousness', or 'substance' of any kind that can be considered to be eternal, unchanging and permanent. (Morrison, 1997 : 129)

Now let us remind ourselves that 'non-presence' of deconstruction means the concepts of 'differ' and 'defer', in order to compare it with the concept of impermanence. Derrida denies the presence, because the things regarded as the presence in our consciousness are in fact different from the things themselves and are later arrived. This negation premises that the things of the outside world exist, or better said, their real existence is not at all becoming an issue. What is concerned for him is, whether the things in our consciousness are same with the things of the outside world or not. The question of their real existence is of no concern.

As a result the following basic difference between deconstruction and

Buddhism can be concluded. The concept of impermanence in Buddhism is an alternative to an existential question about the existence of everything, including the human being. The answer is derived from 'dependent co-arising', in which everything is dependent upon conditions, so nothing can exist permanently. On the contrary the concept of non-presence in Derrida is an answer to a rather phenomenal and psychical question. What it is concerned with is the possibility of our true consciousness. And the answer to this is no, because we cannot perceive the things as themselves, but only as the different and the late arrived.

But it must not be forgotten, that from the Buddhist point of view, the answer to either of the categories of 'existence' or 'non-existence' means that it is diverted from the truth of 'dependent co-arising'. The things are coming into existence depending on conditions, and cease to exist when those conditions are changed. Everything merely has a relative existence. Both the eternalism of 'existence' and annihilationism of 'non-existence' are perverted views. In this respect the 'impermanent' theory of Buddhism is eventually differentiated from 'non-presence' of deconstruction, which one-sidedly denies consciousness. The 'impermanent' concept is misunderstood when it is turned into a theoretical statement proclaiming that everything does not exist. In the context of Buddhist salvational practices an absolute 'is' or 'is not' is useless and misleading, as the Buddha says to Kaccāyana, when asked what the 'right-view' was:

"The majority of the world, Kaccāyana, relies upon two [views]:
Existence and non-existence.

Now he, who with right insight sees the arising of the world as it really is, does not hold that the world is non-existent. But he, who with right insight sees the passing away of the world as it really is, does not hold that the world is existent...

Everything exists: that is one extreme. Nothing exists: this is the other extreme. Not going to either extreme the Tathāgata teaches the truth [Dhamma] of the Middle [Way]. (which is 'dependent co-arising') (S-N ii. 17) (Quoted from Morrison, 1997: 48)

2. 'Dependent co-arising' and the concepts of 'dissemination' and 'différant'

In contact with a thing, we search for a thing itself, its 'own-being'. But we come across a thing always together with others around it, with its

circumstances. A thing is never found by itself alone. So Buddha teaches that one can only abandon all speculations about the self by 'knowing and seeing' that all the conditions and factors, both subjective and objective, which create and constitute our total experience, are 'without self'.(Morrison : 129) Attachment to such speculations will only bring on suffering. What we must know and see, in order to liberate ourselves from suffering, is the doctrine of 'dependent co-arising'. It means that all phenomena come to be in dependence upon other conditions, which are themselves dependent upon other conditions, and so forth, ad infinitum.

This infinite process reminds us of the infinite relations of signifiers in deconstruction. In the state of dissemination there is only a movement from signifier to signifier in the linguistic system. and this movement goes on further, ad infinitum. As a result - thus the conclusions of Derrida - there are no positive entities of signifier or signified and their existence can be identified only through their differences in each linguistic system. Through the concept of differance it is also maintained that the divergent meaning of signified is only deferred, so the writer has no right to decide the meaning of his text. He can only find the signifier in the already given system.

There is certainly a parallel between the doctrine of 'dependent co-arising' and the concepts of dissemination and differant, if we think of the infinite process of movement and the denying of the positive entities. But just as the above comparison of 'non-presence' and 'impermanence' showed, here too a fundamental difference can be found.

'No-consciousness' of deconstruction, which is derived from its denying of positive entities and the infinite movement of signifiers, results in the denying of the subject, who can be an owner of his or her text, which is supposed behind the verbal meaning. The mind, which is believed to be the centre of meaning, is denied as well as a principle of mastery and authority of subject.(Harland : 131) It is a complete reverse of the classical Cartesian conception of the unitary subject as originating consciousness.

The 'Non-self' of Buddhism is quite far from such dualism. It is misunderstood when it is interpreted that the self does not exist. If one says, without a condition there is no arising of consciousness, then it is true. But it means also, if a condition comes to be, then there is also consciousness. So the consciousness of the self exists, or does not exist. Trying to determine, whether a self exists or not, is to assume that one of these extreme views can reveal the truth. But either of them is not true. Therefore, it is the best way of thinking, to see as it is. The self exists, or does not exist.

Candrakirti has clearly shown that under certain circumstances it may

be useful to teach that there is a self, under others that there is none, under others again that there is neither a self nor a non-self. But all these statements are circumscribed by their context, and outside it they lose their significance. In the context of salvational practices an absolute 'is' or 'is not' is useless and misleading.

III. Supplement and Suchness

In reflection on deconstruction and Buddhism the theory of 'Supplement' and 'Suchness' can be suggested as a conclusion. As seen above, Derrida takes the concept of supplement as a strong affirmation to the priority of writing over speaking. The denying of the presence, of positive entities and consciousness brings about the act of infinite writing. "Under the entire domain of linguistic signs"(Derrida, *Of grammatology*, 1976: 44) the writer is free from all responsibilities for his own text. Deconstruction, which started with the critique of logocentrism, shows here an anarchistic moment. Such an attitude is one of those that Buddhism criticises most.

The Buddhist theory of 'impermanent', dependent co-arising and emptiness teaches us non-self, which denies the entities of separate dharmas and brings a notion about the conditions of dharmas. The belief in separate entities arises from a perverted view. But the non-self of Buddhism never means that dharmas are existent or non-existent. In Buddhism any kind of discrimination is regarded as a perversion, and so is any affirmation or negation. To describe anything as existent or non-existent is a perversion. Any kind of dualism is ungrounded. Suchness alone can be free from the perverted knowledge. Even the recognition of the perverted views as perversions cannot be regarded as true, because discrimination is the basic fallacy. That is, the rejection of the perverted views is not valid, because it makes between permanence and impermanence, self and non-self a distinction. So "where non-perversion has been understood (in the sense that perverted views are unreal), no perverted view is left, and there is also no more need to practise." (E. Conze, 1967: 210)

Since it is obviously wrong to conceive the impermanent as permanent, we should regard the impermanent as impermanent, so 'exist' as exist and 'not exist' as not exist. About the relation between Buddhism and deconstruction we may remind of the fact that for the Buddhist the 'eternalist' view is preferred to the 'annihilationist' view. In the *Majjhima-*

Nikāya the doctrine of 'there-is', which affirms the karmic consequences and a world beyond this one, is preferred to the doctrine of 'there-is not', which denies such affirmation.(Morrison : 49)

At this point it must be underlined, that we must distinguish between the two statements. If it is said that the self cannot be identified with a clearly defined substance, then this is different from saying that 'the self does not exist anywhere'. The latter is not only untrue, but also of no use in any practical experience. Besides the compassionate intention of the Buddha must be taken into account. For Buddha it is not important to make theories. Unlike the scholastic disputation, which pursues the logical perfection of the absolute truth, the meaning of the Buddhist lectures is to give a practical help, to be free from the suffering of our life. So the Buddhist truth, which will be researched only in the theory, will be no use. It must be realized in the practical life.

References

- Samyutta-Nikāya* ed. L. Feer, 5 vol. (London, 1884-98): *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, 5 vols. Trans. C.A.F. Rhys Davids and F.L. Woodward (London, 1917-30).
- Conze, Edward 1967 *Buddhist thought in India*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Culler, Jonathan 1982 *On deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques 1973 *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Transl. D.B. Allison, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- _____ 1976 *Of Grammatology*. Transl. G.Ch. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- _____ 1978 *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*. Trans. J.P. Leavey, Jr. Stony Brook: Nicholas Hays.
- _____ 1978 *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Trans. B. Harlow. Chicago:

-
-
- 1979 University of Chicago Press.
_____ *Dissemination*. Trans. B. Johnson. London: Athlone
1981 Press.
_____ *Dissemination*. Trans. Chicago: University of Chicago
1982 Press.
_____ *Positions*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: University of
1981 Chicago Press.
_____ *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago
1982 University of Chicago Press.
- Harland, Richard *Superstructuralism: The philosophy of structuralism and*
1987 *post-structuralism*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Morrison, Robert G. *Nietzsche and Buddhism*. New York: Oxford
1997 University.
- Sarup, Madan *An introductory guide to post-structuralism and*
1988 *postmodernism*. New York, etc.: Harvester
Wheatsheaf.
- Saussure, F de *Course in general linguistics*. London: Peter Owen.
1960
- Silverman, Hugh J. *Textualities: between hermeneutics and deconstruction*.
1994 New York, London: Routledge.