Another Perspective on Deconstruction:  
The Postmodern Poetics of  
Transcendental Diamond Wisdom Sutra

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In presenting the view of the world and life in *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra* (《金刚经》), Buddha also presents the Buddhist view of language, so that the followers are able to understand how to attain the state of wisdom and to transcend to the world of oneness, the clear and broad human heart, with neither a boundary nor a barrier there. While approaching it for a further step, one can find a lot of similarities between the script and Derrida’s deconstructive work, and the contemporary cultural practice of cultural studies in terms of the meaning of language. Consequently, the significance of the script as cultural politics in the contemporary society will be clearly demonstrated. The following part will be devoted to a detailed analysis of the perspectives of language from triple points of view.

I. The View of Language in *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra*

Firstly, *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra* is characterized by the denial of western metaphysics or the existence or the essence of things, especially illustrated by its view on language or ‘the names of things’. Names/words are not considered as possessing any essential meaning but they are used as a convenient or a strategic means to talk about things when they are used in real life. The reason for it is that those temporarily existing things (names) are named by human beings but are used by Buddha simply as an easy means of communication in accordance with the customs of human beings. According to Buddha, names representing the images of objects or people are only forms (相), and it is thus wrong to stick to forms/names, for they are the creations of humans for various relevant reasons by the human heart which is fundamentally pure. Thus, the fixed relationship between names/signifiers and mental images is subverted, so is the center which is often held onto by men. The adverse result of the insistence on the existence of a center is that it ruins the purity of the heart by ‘framing’ or ‘inscribing’ things (including thinking/thoughts) upon the human mind, thus ruining its purity there.

To expound clearly the notion of the human heart for diamond wisdom transcendence, as the script shows, Buddha teaches through words/speech, with the purpose to tell human followers to keep the heart detached from the ‘forms’ (相) of words, speech as well as related thoughts (离文字相，离言语相，离心缘相). Specifically, while speaking/writing or doing things with words in human affairs, the human heart should be able to be immune from the ‘pollutions’ of words or meanings, so that it does not hold onto any words/speech/images/meaning to insist on the existence of differentiating centers. In other words, in the actual use of language, when one is speaking/thinking, one should be clear that words and speech
are metaphysically void (言语道断，心行处灭)，and one should also be clear that they become void instantly since they are subject to the instant birth and extinction due to certain causal relations (因缘而生，刹那生灭). So, neither the ‘form’ of words/speech/thinking nor that of ‘void’ could be held onto, as both belong to the oneness of the true human heart which is the origin of everything. Holding onto anything will lead to the ruin of the pure human heart as well as the split/division of its harmonious oneness (会起执着、分别，破坏清静心).

Secondly, binary thinking is strongly rejected in *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra*. According to the right faith of the script, not only is there the denial of the existence of a particular being, there is the denial of the existence of not-a-being, as it says, ‘Therefore, one should not hold on to a notion of a thing, and should not hold on to a notion of not-a-thing.’ In particular, there is no division of polarities such as good and evil, true and false, self and other, right or wrong, Buddha or humans. Neither of the two notions should be held onto by the human heart, let alone the privileging of one over the other or with one part over the other. Namely, there is no centering on either of the notions. The heart is but in a natural state of affairs rather than on either side of the notions (两边不取). One should not hold onto even Buddhist rules, let alone the non-Buddhist teachings. In fact, according to the script, one should work for the benefits of the masses with the heart holding onto nothing - not even to void (应无所住，行于布施).

In terms of language, ‘speaking’ and ‘non-speaking’ as well as ‘thinking’ and ‘non-thinking’ are not taken for two forms but for one body, as both arise from the one human heart (言与无言，思与无思是“一”不是“二”). And the effect is that speaking and thinking are taken for an activity, a game of words. While they are being performed, they should not affect one’s heart which should always remain pure and tranquil, with no obstacles/barriers to attain wisdom. To summarize, in *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra*, language is regarded as a means for communication, a strategic means (方便) to account for the wisdom of the human heart. When binary thinking is denied, from the perspective of Buddha, the purity of the heart is maintained, as it is detached from any ‘form’(心不住于相，无住生心).

The anti-thinking is related to the denial of non-differentiation (不分别), which links with the notion of oneness (三千大千世界是一体的). This oneness can be accounted for by the view that all things and all notions do not originate in anything but are the creations of the heart and the results of a causal chain of happenings, but the heart where everything arises is really clear in nature (缘起性空). Thus, as everything is assumed as created by the heart which is as clear as a mirror reflecting but not holding onto anything, things thus born of it are equal to each other: good and evil, right and wrong are considered as equal, as both are born of the heart. In other words, polarities actually share the same body - they actually belong to one. Namely, if dust (the human thoughts like good or evil) on the heart mirror is cleared, unclearness is turned into clearness, hence there is no difference between the two. Thus, clearness and unclearness are an integrated one, as both come from the heart.

Thirdly, the notion of diversity is emphasized due to the resistance to holding onto and differentiating things which are but forms. Equality of all beings and all
notions are highlighted, as it says,

Subhuti, what do you think, has Tathagata attained the unsurpassable right and full enlightenment? Are there sayings of Tathagata that are teachings?" Subhuti said, "According to my understanding of the meaning of what the Buddha said, there is neither a definite thing named as ‘the unsurpassable right and full enlightenment’, nor definite teachings that Tathagata could say. Why is it so? The teachings as said by Tathagata are all neither to be adopted nor to be said, neither teachings nor non-teachings. Why is it so? All virtuous ones and holy ones employ uncontrived teachings through various approaches. (须菩提 于意云何 如来得阿耨多罗三藐三菩提耶 如来有所说法耶 须菩提言 如我解佛所说义 无有定法名阿耨多罗三藐三菩提 亦无有定法如来可说 何以故 如来所说法 皆不可取 不可说 非法 非非法 所以者何 一切贤圣 皆以无为法而有差别).

Here, according to *Diamond Wisdom Transcendence*, Subhuti denies he has grasped Buddha’s teachings, as he does not assert the existence of one and only absolutely right and meaningful teaching of Buddha - ‘neither a definite thing named as “the unsurpassable right and full enlightenment”, nor definite teachings that Tathagata could say’. The reason is that, first, one should not hold onto the teaching; secondly, there should not be any differentiation between Buddha’s teachings and non-teachings. There is neither Buddhist attainment nor Buddhist saying. Here, we are reminded that Buddha does not assume certainty or fixity of one single approach. Rather he emphasizes that many approaches taught to humans are equal, as one approach may be fit for one specific kind of person. The teachings or teaching approaches differ with respect to difference in time, place and people to be taught. Therefore, diverse approaches/discourses are possible and equal (诸法平等，无有高下); none of the approaches should be taken for one certain approach, and adopted as such, in order to avoid the trap of binary opposition, or the differentiation between self and the other.

Fourthly, the practical function of language is highlighted with the Buddhist emphasis of it as a convenient means of teaching.

In fact, Master Jung Kung once explained the form of language: language should be approached in several perspectives: Buddhist understanding/view of language (理), its use in daily affairs as reference to things (事) for human communication; its form(相), and its being(体).2 In form, it refers to the image of words and grammar as well as their meanings. But in being, according to Buddhist understanding, it does not exist or there is no essence nor presence. However, from the point of view of actual use of language, Buddha makes use of the form as a means to do things, namely, to teach people. The use of language in daily affairs as reference to things (事) for human communication is highlighted. But when he teaches people with language, Buddha does not hold onto the form of language with his mind, although he makes use of it by speaking it. He is clear enough words are void in meaning in nature - the heart is always clear.
The fact / truth of the world ("诸法实相"), if there is, is that everything in the whole world is but one body ("诸法一如"), and all things are but a result of a causal chain of development (缘起), but it has no essence but illusions from a clear mind due to the mind’s work of differentiation and persistence. Things thus do not have any essences but share one body. In other words, no presence could be begotten (了不可得, 当处皆空; 凡所有相, 皆是虚妄). One reason for the view of the non-existence of things is that everything in the world is subject to constant changing (刹那生灭, 了不可得: 世界是刹那 900 生灭的相续相, 不可执着). So one cannot hold onto anything because nothing exists but is subject to perpetual changing. Forms are held onto only by those who are unawakened but they are actually illusions/fantasies upon the human mind, which are then held up. Actually, they consist of no essence. But for the illusions and the causal chain, there is the clear mind/heart which is able to mirror everything if holding onto nothing. Thus, as illusions, nothing should be held onto, neither ‘existence’ (”有”) nor void (”无”), as holding onto the former means the existence of the latter (”无”) due to differentiation - both are binary thinking or illusions which may lead to annoyances (烦恼) and to incarnation (六道轮回). So neither “existing” nor “non-existence” should be held onto. The reason is only by non-holding-onto-anything can there be a clear mind which mirrors everything in the world (智慧通达, 事事无碍). And only by this way can one lay down (放下) everything including Buddhist teachings to achieve wisdom and transcendence (and to go beyond incarnation as well).

But language, as imaginations or illusions, is connected with “existing” (“有”) which does not reflect the oneness world (一真法界、真如法界、心性、性体), which is changeless, clear and bright, able to give birth to wisdom and things. Thus, language cannot be held onto, according to Buddhist understanding (理). But different languages are spoken and written by people in this world (事), which are in images and with meanings, namely, with a ‘form’ (相), for human communication (用). As for Buddha, he uses language because human beings use it and hold onto it as a form. In other words, language is used merely as a social tool/medium to teach Buddhist ideas to human beings. But to maintain the clearness/void of the oneness world of the human mind, one should not hold onto anything inside. Therefore, Buddha denies that he talks about Buddhist teachings. His purpose is to reject the holding onto language and dividing things bifocally, and to reject the essentialist notion of both language and the Buddhist discourse, and hence to highlight the oneness-clear-world, which is human nature.

In terms of language specifically used in human life, its significance lies only in its use, otherwise it has no meaning at all. Therefore, it can be seen that Buddhist notion is especially connected with the notion that ‘language is used to do things’, the social and functional aspect of language, which is highlighted in Derrida’s deconstruction.
It can be seen that the Buddhist notion of language is anti-essentialist or anti-metaphysical where language and thinking are taken for human existence embracing certain truth or presence, which are ‘centers’ appearing in polarity. This detachment from metaphysics is typical of Derrida’s ‘decentering’ work, highlighting the qualities of randomness, equality, and diversity of language. Moreover, the functionality of language is emphasized.

II. Derrida’s Deconstructive Notion of Language

Derrida’s deconstruction is largely done on the basis of structural linguistics which links the structure of language with the structure of thinking and hence with human existence. Saussure (1983), the structuralist linguist, defines language, the medium of rational thinking, as a system of signs with the signifier corresponding to a signified in his semiology. In the fixity of the binary structure between the arbitrarily designated signifier and the signified, there is the supposition of the existence of a mental concept (or a mental image in the speaker’s mind) so that the signifier is but an outside label stuck to the ‘thought’ preoccupying the speaker’s mind. With this binary bond, there is the presupposition of being/existence or the essence of things in western metaphysical tradition since the ancient Greek times. By arranging signs in a system of ‘difference’, Saussure makes possible a linguistic structure/network to represent a particular culture or thoughts. Thus, language, as a system of representation, composes but a structure of social culture, which is considered as a fixed framework in human society. And this is what Derrida’s deconstruction is aimed at.

Firstly, Derrida subverts the western logocentric tradition which assumes the existence of essence/truth/presence which could finally be located by rational thinking. This is attained by deconstructing binary thinking and the various centers presumed to exist in western culture through subverting phonocentrism. Derrida criticizes western culture as centering on sound, because sound/speech is always considered as more lively and thus more natural and closer to humans, and speech and meaning are considered as identified with each other. Speech is thus considered as representing ‘presence’, while writing is only the signs designated to represent speech, is indirect and should thus be subordinate to speech. To the contrast of speech, writing represents ‘absence’. However, writing is argued by Derrida as privileged to speech rather than vice-versa in western metaphysics.

Phonocentrism is subverted in order to deconstruct ‘presence’ in western metaphysics which is logocentric and aimed to find truth. In other words, in western metaphysics which centers on logos or sound, ‘presence’ is rendered as overdominating ‘absence’. By way of subverting logocentrism, he deconstructs two conventional constructs: A. presence/meaning/essence/truth; B. binary thinking, as shown in the hierarchical oppositions between speech and writing, good and evil, being and void, life and death, truth and falsity. In this case, western language, its mode of thinking together with its moral and ethical values which are largely based on and supported by western metaphysics are all dissolved. And on this basis, the whole western metaphysical effort to find the origin of meaning (logos) is suspended. In the end, the fictional nature of meaning/origin/‘presence’ is disclosed.

Thirdly, to illustrate the ‘decentering’ effort, Derrida coins up a word ‘differance’ pointing to the perpetual deferral and deferring of meaning in the meaning chain, in order to unfix meaning or to reject presence. By this word, a sign can either have numerous meanings or no meaning at all, which discloses the
fictional nature of a sign, and hence the fictional nature of any center of a centering
sign system. Based on this, he disrupts the closure of any meaning system or culture,
claiming the cultural openness and diversity of cultural forms.

In fact, to go beyond Saussure’s linguistic structure supported by the existence
of ‘difference’ in meaning, Derrida created ‘provisionally the word or concept of
differance’\(^4\), which has the same Latin root ‘differre’ as the word ‘difference’ in
Saussure’s structuralism, suggesting the order of binary oppositions and the
difference in meaning as fixed centers to differentiate self and other, but which goes
beyond any order of ‘oppositions’,

Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists
the oppositions, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy,
between the sensible and the intelligible. The order which resists this
opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a
movement of ‘difference (with an a) between two differences or two
letters, a difference which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing
in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space that will
keep us together here for an hour, between speech and writing, and
beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us in our illusion that
they are two\(^5\).

So, differance is anti-binary, to be against any conflicting relations or polarities in
order to highlight the emphasis to go beyond bifocal structure.

Secondly, Derrida refuses to bring out any fixed meaning to language. As he
explains the meaning of the word differance there,

\[\text{Now if differance is (and I also cross out the ‘is’)}\]
\[\text{what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as}
\text{such. It is never offered to the present (1995:122).}\]

So, differance refuses the conventional metaphysical meaning of certainty,

\[\ldots\text{differance is not , does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any}
\text{form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not,}
\text{that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor}
\text{essence...beyond the finite categories of essence and existence}
\text{(p.122).}\]

Then, deprived of ontological meaning, differance, is characterized by its ‘strategic
and adventurous’ ‘play’ (p.123), as a concept which ‘keeps itself beyond these
oppositions, announcing the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance
and necessity in calculations without end’ (p.123).

Moreover, with its root from the Latin root differre, meaning ‘to wit, the action
of putting off until later’ in the sense of time, differance suggests a delay in
meaning - a ‘temporization’ (p.123) in the meaning chain. Simultaneously, as
differre, means ‘to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc.’, suggesting ‘an
interval, a distance, spacing’ (p123), differance thus refers to both the temporal
deferring and the spatial deferral of meaning in the meaning chain, to show that the
metaphysical meaning of the sign becomes a perpetually deferred presence -
‘moving toward the deferred presence’ (p.124). Consequently, language becomes
‘provisional’ and ‘secondary’, as a ‘becoming-being’ without a presence, as the sign
has no totalized essential meaning in the system of representation. As Derrida says,

\[\text{‘one no longer includes differance in the concept of the sign, which}\]
always has meant the representation of a presence, and has been constituted in a system (thought or language) governed by and moving toward presence (p.124).

In this way, Derrida deconstructs Saussure’s conception of language as a (fixed) system of signs representing social convention, which are in turn inscribed upon human beings while they are spoken as social-cultural constraints. The ‘decentering’ project is thus attained when the power of language is subverted, especially with its detachment from metaphysics and the polar structure, with all the ‘centering’ notions dissolved. Even Heidegger’s suggestion of an ontological-transcendental human existence in language/sign/thoughts becomes a fiction, as existence itself is subverted as a deferred presence. Consequently, when it is liberated from its ‘prison-house’ (Jameson 1975), language presents a random play of meaning substituting Saussure’s notion of ‘differences’ in the language system. Language has not a prescribed, fixed difference in meaning but ‘differences are themselves effects’ of the ‘exchange of language and speech’, and the ‘differences’ are historical.

Furthermore, by this means and in effect of the refusal of the presence of the meaning of ‘differance’, Derrida highlights another aspect of language - the function of signs. Specifically, language is used to do things, both as a means and as a deed done in human life, with no transcendental meaning otherwise. The sign derives its ‘meaning’ only on specific occasions, so that the meaning varies on different occasions, as occasional ‘effects’ or deeds done; and once it is done, it is over. Thus, the sign plays with multiple meanings instead of embracing a fixed, essential meaning with rigid, systematic differences from one another. Thus, the metaphysical meaning of the sign is but nothing, a void, and the sign in use can have multiple meanings.

III. Conclusion

First, Derrida’s deconstruction is to disclose the fictional nature of western metaphysics, which corresponds to Buddhism in the conception of language:

Basically, the fictional nature of language is asserted by both the Buddhist view and Derrida’s view of language. Both deny the existence of any fixed meaning or the metaphysical existence of world and people. In fact, Derrida’s notion of the meaning of the sign as a deed done is rather like Buddhist’s notion of the ‘form’ which is subject to change, with no metaphysical meanings. And the Buddhist denial of the existence of words/speech is largely based on the view that things/forms in this world are subject to constant birth and extinction and thus there is no fixity of meaning. Besides, for Buddhists, language is also confirmed as a convenient means to do things: once the deed is done, the meaning is over – there is no metaphysical existence behind signs. The difference lies in that language is approached from different perspectives. The Buddhist view of language is the result of applying the Buddhist view of the world to the aspect of language, especially in terms of it as a convenient means to convey Buddha’s wisdom/teachings to attain a pure heart. Thus, how to understand and follow Buddhist teaching by approaching language is expounded in detail to the followers of Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra. Moreover, the notion of language in relation to the Buddhist view of the world and life is highlighted in order that the Buddhist view may be understood best. Language is taken for an inspiring power to the followers, a
convenient means to teach only. But it is a creation or an effect as well, of the combination of the Buddhist wisdom and the wish for humans to live a happy life. Derrida’s deconstruction is attained when interrogating structural linguistics - by analyzing the sign, the basic unit of language, specifically, by means of subverting western logocentrism and illustrating with a coined-up word *differance* which refuses to be present in meaning. As a result, both metaphysical ‘centers’ and binary thinking in western tradition are thwarted. Though the ways of approaching language are different, the understandings of language are much similar.

In the end, there is one characteristic in common: both views are approached out of a humanitarian spirit to help humans be free from the bonds imposed upon them by the repressive power of social convention and to help people to live a free and happy life.

Then, the humanitarian spirit is taken a step further by critics in cultural studies, who are specially concerned for the use of language in human society in terms of the meaning construction in language. As indicated in the previous part that a deconstructive project has been undertaken by both Buddhist and the postmodernist views of language, which is the opposite stance to that of the Saussure’s structural ‘differences’ between words, cultural critics, based on the deconstruction of the metaphysical meaning of the sign and binary thinking where ‘centers’ of meaning and the privilege of some ‘centers’ over others are assumed, criticize the ‘centering’ discourse or social language which divides people into different social groups in a differentiating form between ‘self’ from the ‘other’. Language/discourse has become a prevalent social practice which imposes power upon people. The use of language in this way not only implies the existence of metaphysical meaning of signs but also the hierarchical structure of things due to the assumed ‘presence’ of certain fixed qualities attached to signs in a fixed relationship, especially in terms of human relationship in a particular society. Language has never become so powerful, as it is actually a discursive tool embedded in a social structure to speak of people, who are then not only defined but also ordered by those in power. Specifically, people are differentiated according to gender, race/ethnicity, class, and are then stuck with labels supposed to represent their ‘essential’, ‘objective’ perpetual identity. Human beings are overwhelmed by the network of power presumed to be a fixed structure, and human experiences in the world are prescribed by meaning or representation. Yet, this rigid linguistic structure is interrogated by many critics in cultural studies, a discipline devoted to the questioning of the common-sensical discourse/signs overdominating people through technological reproduction or various forms of new media in the postmodern society.

Presumably, cultural studies is ‘influenced by poststructuralist theories of language, representation and subjectivity’ (Barker 2003:5) and seeks to make to matters of power and cultural politics. That is, to an exploration of representations of and ‘for’ marginalized social groups and the need for cultural change. Hence, cultural studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice. Here, knowledge is never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality, that is, of the place from which one speaks, to whom, and for what purposes (Barker 2003:5).

Here, according to Chris Barker, cultural studies, largely based on Derrida’s deconstructive critique of language as representation creating centers of western
culture and Foucault’s discourse as power subjecting people to control (Foucault 1988), renders language as a social, political practice, as signs used specially by specific group of people in a given society for certain purposes. Notions of diversity of voices and equality of them as well as culture forms are also articulated for social transformation. Language is seen as a strategic means to deconstruct power and social oppression as displayed in the rigid binary identity: white/black, male/female, west/east, etc., where western metaphysical thinking overdominates. This view of the functionality of language goes especially with the fictional character of language or language as a game, a human activity, as noticeable in the Buddhist view about three thousand years ago.

It can be seen from the history of the last forty years that articulation does work in terms of the resistance politics from margin to center. This cultural politics really functions positively to improve human conditions concerning the issues of race, gender, class, identity and environment, and a lot of strategies, social and cultural are employed to subvert hierarchies set up in history brought about by culture in hegemony. But if the pure heart of oneness-world is emphasized to every person, and the desire for power is reduced from subjectivity, it seems that it is the most thorough deconstructive activity - with no lust, no essential centers or metanarratives to abide by, no specific efforts of hierarchical differentiation, but to conduct human activities toward a better condition, with a sense of equality and the assertion of diversity and co-existence, and the world would become a better one. The reason is that the Buddhist idea as shown in Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra really echoes with the deconstructive project and the practice of cultural studies in the aspect of language. In a way, it is the most thorough postmodern politics.

References


Notes

1. Both the Chinese and English version of Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra are available on the Internet at: http://www.yogichen.org/efiles/b052.html. The Chinese version, popularly known as the Diamond Sutra Under Imperial Order,
was translated into Chinese by Tripitaka Dharma Master Kumarajiva of Yao Qin Dynasty. The English version is translated by Dr. Yutang Lin.

2. This is noted down from Master Jung Kung’s lecture on Diamond Wisdom Transcendence Sutra, (净空法师: 语言有理、事, 相, 体, 用诸方面). His lecture is available on DVD, and also on the website at: http://www.amtb.tw/news/news.asp.


