

Leesa S. Davis, *Advaita Vedanta and Zen Buddhism: Deconstructive Modes of Spiritual Inquiry*. London and New York: Continuum Studies in Eastern Philosophies, 2010. Xxi + 222 pages.

The relationship between Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta is quite curious. Their worldviews are very different, of course – in fact *too* different, because they seem to be mirror images of each other: no-self (*anatta*) vs. all-Self (atman = Brahman), conditionality vs. the Unconditioned, impermanence vs. the Immutable, and so forth. Given their common denial any ontological duality between self and other, one wonders whether their opposed conceptual systems might actually be different attempts to describe the same nondual experience. If Brahman has no characteristics of its own, and *sunyata* has no characteristics of its own, then what distinguishes pure Being from pure non-being?

Leena Davis's superb book explores this possibility by comparing the methods and spiritual practices of Advaita and Zen. She shows how both traditions use very similar techniques to subvert and deconstruct dualistic patterns of thinking and experiencing, in order to reveal a nondual way of knowing that Zen and Advaita both claim is innate but normally unrecognized.

She begins with a masterful survey of the foundational philosophies on both sides, focusing on their deconstructive function. I was especially impressed by her overview of the Advaita tradition, which links the Upanisadic emphasis on the identity of atman and Brahman with the teachings of Gaudapada (the everyday dualistic world is mere illusion: no one is in bondage, no one is ever liberated) and Sankara (due to superimpositions the world is thought-constructed and mis-apprehended). She explores the roots of Zen in the Lankavatara Sutra, the Prajnaparamita literature, the Madhyamika anti-philosophy of Nagarjuna, and the Japanese Soto school founded by Dogen.

The most insightful – indeed, revelatory -- part of the book is the way that Davis connects these nondualist teachings with the particular methodologies employed by both traditions. She brings these practices to life by incorporating the dialogues of modern Neo-Vedantins such as Ramana Maharshi and H. W. A. Poonja, and on the Buddhist side the contemporary Soto Zen master Ekai Korematsu. She clarifies her points by adding material from her own interviews with Zen and Advaita practitioners.

At the heart of the book are four deconstructive techniques that are identified as important to both traditions:

1. unfindability analysis (especially “who am I?”: spiritual inquiry cannot find any self, or anything else to attain)
2. bringing everything back to the here and now (there is no subject that is “in” objective space/time)
3. paradoxical problems (subverting “either/or” ways of thinking)
4. negation (*neti neti*, “not this, not that”: undoing all identifications)

Davis uses a “hermeneutical-phenomenological strategy” to interpret teacher-student dialogues. She understands the interaction in both traditions as a dialectic between two levels of reality (or two truths): the student speaks from a relative dualistic *vyavahara* standpoint, while the teacher demonstrates the absolute nondual *paramarthika* position. She also emphasizes that that way of explaining the process is itself dualistic: a teacher helps a student see through thought-constructed dualities, not to switch from the lower perspective to a higher perspective, but to be liberated from both perspectives when the distinction between those two dissolves.

This does not mean that both sides understand the methodology in the same way: there remain significant conceptual differences between *advaitavada* (the “way of non-difference” between atman and Brahman) and *advayavada* (the “way of not-two,” denying that things are separate from each other). Advaita teachers emphasize becoming aware of “the space between thoughts”, while Soto Zen teachers focus on the ever-changing relational dynamic between thinking and not-thinking. Advaita practitioners report being “filled with a tremendous self-ness” in which there is nothing other than the “I”; Buddhist practitioners describe losing a sense of self. Phenomenologically, however, the “undoing” that is experienced on both sides is an opening or emptying of the dualistic sense of self into an immediacy beyond thought-constructions that bifurcate this from that. Both Advaita and Zen employ the four techniques to undermine the same dualities: subject and object (self and other), cause and effect (means and ends), and linear (I would prefer “objective/external”) conceptions of space and time.

The focus on the Soto practice of *shikan-taza* (“just sitting”) as exemplifying Zen sparks my only criticism: Davis effectively ignores Rinzai *koan* practice, in which students try to solve paradoxical questions. Her preference is understandable: Dogen’s denial that meditation is a *means* to an *end* (enlightenment) is obviously more compatible with Advaita, yet that leaves a big hole in her comparison.

Measured by what this book achieves, that is a trivial complaint. Because of her insight into both traditions, Davis is able to reveal profound similarities between the nondual transformations that both aspire to. This encourages us to reflect on the broader implications. It has become academically unfashionable to argue that different spiritual paths lead to the same mountain top, but now we have a new perspective with which to consider other nondualist traditions: Daoism, Kashmir Shaivism, Ibn’Arabi, *The Cloud of Unknowing* ...

The worst part of this book is its price. Continuum should be ashamed to charge \$120 for the hardbound version, \$45 for the softbound, which makes it likely that this excellent study will not receive the readership, and therefore the influence, that it deserves.