A conversation between Stephen Batchelor and Buddhists in New Zealand

*This is a lightly edited transcript of the final evening of a study group which was focussing on a secular approach to Buddhism that took place in person in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, and online using Skype from September through to November 2007.*

**Ramsey Margolis**
Good evening, everybody. Good morning, Stephen. It’s seven o’clock in the morning I believe.

**Stephen Batchelor**
That’s right. Yeah. Seven o’clock in the morning here in France.

**Ramsey Margolis**
Welcome to New Zealand, and kia ora. It’s your time now, and I believe you’ve received some questions from us.

**Stephen Batchelor**
Good evening, New Zealand, Kia ora. It’s morning here in France, it’s rather dark. And I have a couple of friends here from a Dutch TV company who are filming as I speak to you, so you have an audience this end as well.

The first questions come from Jonathan Wood: How do traditional Buddhist teachers respond to your reinterpretation of the Buddha’s teachings? Do you find that people disagree with your translations of the original Pali? Do you have any sense of how influential or otherwise your views have been on Buddhism as it is taught and practiced in the west?

Well, it’s very difficult to say. In general, traditional Buddhist teachers, there are so many of them, and I think, probably some do and others don’t disagree with what I try and do, and doubtless in varying degrees. People whom I’ve shown my translations of the Pali to do not find them terribly problematic.

How influential or otherwise have I been? I think it is way too early to tell. Certainly what I do provokes discussion, and I know that some of that is sympathetic, and some of it is not but that’s precisely how the discussion should be. So I’m quite happy really to have contributed to some sort of debate, and may it go on and may it be fruitful.
Second question: ‘I learned vipassana, as taught by SN Goenka. He said that the style of vipassana that he teaches was the same as that taught originally by the Buddha, and that the style had remained unchanged in Burma over the centuries, even though it changed in India itself. Would you agree with this interpretation?’

Probably not. This is something that Mr. Goenka claims. But when one looks, at least in the Pali texts, you don’t find anything about sweeping the body as he specifically teaches, more about a particular focus on *vedana* in the body. If I remember that was his main object of awareness, at least at the beginning.

I’m afraid that this is another example of someone trying to find, or trying to claim some sort of authority by appealing to an unchanged pure tradition that has somehow remained untouched by time. I believe that he has some of his students trawling through the classical texts to try to find more support for their approach. I don’t think it really matters, frankly. If the meditation works, if it generates insight, and if it leads to the diminishing of greed and hatred, I don’t see why one would have to make this strong argument in any case.

Third question. ‘In the last talk, you said that the self could be regarded as a refuge.’

I didn’t say that. The Buddha said that. It’s in the Mahaparanibbana Sutta.

‘You said that we have the scope to mould ourselves through our practice. And that at the end of our lives we could experience refuge and perhaps satisfaction in this created self.’

You must be referring to that verse I often cite from the Dhammapada.

‘But how is this reconciled with the view that the self has no essence, that we cannot find it in the body, the mind the senses, and so on? How can something with no essence be moulded, and remain shaped by that moulding? How is the would-be stream entrant to balance these apparently contradictory views in his mind in his practice, or her practice?’

The fact is, I believe that it’s only because the self has no essential nature, there is not a fixed, permanent thing of any kind, that it is open to the possibility of being shaped and moulded and created and developed. There is no contradiction between these two views. In fact, the idea of there being literally no self is not an idea that the Buddha taught. And the Buddha can speak in some passages, as I quoted here, in an entirely ordinary and non-problematic way about the fact that there is a self. The problem is that we tend to think of this self as something that it isn’t, namely, something that is somehow unconditioned, not part of the
contingent world, something that is permanent, unaffected by change and conditions likewise.

In many senses, what the Buddha is critiquing is not our ordinary everyday sense of being me, but rather the view of self that was current in his time in India, which he inherited or which was inherited from the Upanishadadic doctrines. Now, that kind of self he has no time for whatsoever. This is a metaphysical self. But nonetheless, in our everyday experience, we do have this kind of intuitive feeling that there is something detached and removed from experience that looks in on everything, as it were, a kind of timeless witness, as it’s sometimes called in Hinduism.

This is something that Buddha doesn’t accept. He sees this as an illusion, as a fiction. But the fact that we are all individual people, the fact that we are all distinctive identities – Stephen and Ramsey and Tony and Barbara and so on – the fact that we become such people through the actions we commit, and through the things that we learn and through the relationships we develop, this is in fact only possible because there is no fixed ego or me standing behind the scenes peering in on what’s going on.

So I don’t have a difficulty with this apparent contradiction whatsoever. In fact, I think that the two ways in which we need to consider self, namely as a process on the one hand that we are somehow responsible for, and as something that does not have any kind of fixed essence, these two things are necessarily compatible, not incompatible.

‘How’s your thought moved on since these talks in Beatenberg? Could you say something about the Buddha being an ironic atheist?’

Since I gave the talks you listened to, which I think was last year in Switzerland one of the things that’s been very influential has been my studies of the Upanishads and the Vedas, I’m trying to get a much clearer sense of what was actually believed and taught, at least to some extent widespread in the religious culture of the Buddha’s time. So I’ve been going through the Upanishads, which if you have a chance, they’re very easy to read, and they are actually rather beautiful texts.

This I found very helpful in being able to put a number of the Buddha’s comments about different elements of non-Buddhist thought that he addressed during his lifetime, into some wider context. One of these has to do with the way the Buddha relates to the idea of God, or in Upanishadadic language Brahman, or Brahma. The Buddha seems to take a stance, I don’t have the actual text to hand at the moment, but somewhere in the Digga Nikaya, I think, number 14, there’s a long and rather odd story of how a monk wants to know where the elements end
without something or the other, in other words, one of these big sort of metaphysical ultimate questions. And so the monk goes to ask all the different celestials, all the different gods, until he comes to the god called the Great Brahma. And the Great Brahma, who’s the kind of top God, is asked this question, but all he answers is, ‘I am the great Brahma, I am the uncreated, I am the father of all creation, I am this, I am that, I am the other’. And the monk said, I didn’t ask you that. I asked you where do all the elements come from and without limitation. In response, the Great Brahma says, ‘I am the Great Brahma, I’m the creator of the universe, I am this, I’m that, I’m the other’. And then finally, when the monk has had enough of that, the Great Brahma takes the monk aside by the arm, and says to him, ‘Well, actually, the reason I keep repeating myself is because in the presence of all these other gods, I can’t admit that actually, I don’t know where the great elements end without limitation’.

So clearly here, this is a kind of a sendup, really, of at least a certain idea of god, the idea of God as a sort of transcendent, creator, father figure of the universe, which of course is not light years away from some understandings of our own monotheistic God.

You find the Buddha in that particular passage, and also in other texts, taking an attitude in which he doesn’t come across as a gung ho atheist, saying ‘God is a absurd idea, it doesn’t make any sense, that people who believe in this really need to have their head examined’, which is the kind of evangelical atheism current in some writers today in the west. Rather, he doesn’t take the idea terribly seriously at all. He doesn’t give to it the seriousness that its believers demand that it should have.

In other words, the Buddha is not a fanatic. He’s not somebody who is holding on tight to some opinion for or against God. He’s simply pointing out certain contradictions, certain aspects of this notion of God that actually don’t make an awful lot of sense. He simply doesn’t give it that amount of credibility or seriousness. It’s in that sense that I would call the Buddha an ironic atheist. And he certainly is, I think, an atheist, or if I’m honest, if one doesn’t like that word, one can say he is a non-theist.

But the fact is that the issue of God, which is such a central issue in our monotheistic religions, is one that simply doesn’t have that role in Buddhism. It’s actually a false distinction or dichotomy to set up belief in God with rejection of belief in God, as though that is an adequate framework within which to understand the Buddha’s teaching. I don’t think it is really. The Buddha certainly had his opinions on this topic, but they’re in no way central. And there is no sense that the Buddha somehow defines himself as being anti-God.

Next question: ‘What are your thoughts on the usefulness or otherwise of religious ritual?’
Well, again, this question is perhaps too broadly stated to give a simple answer. You see, I would argue that a bunch of 25 people sitting cross-legged in a room on cushions around the wall for 45 minute periods is a religious ritual. If someone who knew nothing about it were to see that activity taking place, it would have associations of religious practice in a highly controlled and ritualistic setting, albeit a somewhat minimalist nature.

So any collective activity by which a group of people collectively affirm their values and their faith and their practices to some extent are rituals. On the basic level, I have no particular problem with that, but I suspect that the question is more to do with with bells and whistles, and lighting candles and incense on rather elaborate altars with golden images of the Buddha, and bowing down, and so forth and so on.

Again, I think one can only really evaluate that in terms of what is the person’s motives? For example, what is it that such a practice brings to that person’s life? If it were clearly just some empty ritual that was done out of habit, then I don’t think it would have much value. But it could be deeply, deeply, deeply fulfilling to a particular person on their particular path. And so I don’t see why one should have a problem with that.

Nonetheless, the Buddha did state quite clearly that a person who has entered the eightfold path or the stream is no longer dependent or convinced in any way that just by performing rituals, themselves, will in any way bring one to some sense of insight or understanding. And I think probably here he had in mind the rituals of the Brahmin priests of his time. We have to remember that in the Upanishads there is already a movement that’s critical of the overly ritualistic practices of the Brahmins. So that tension is not even an exclusively Buddhist one. I think the Buddha was one person who, with many others of that period, were beginning to question the ritualistic foundations of Indian society and were pointing more to a path of personal liberation and salvation that wasn’t dependent upon the intercession of the priests with the gods.

So a kind of reform movement was already underway at the Buddha’s time. And people like Mahavira and many of the other teachers and monks and ascetics were likewise, moving away from the primacy of religious ritual.

Next question: ‘Are you considering producing new translations of any of the early texts?’

Yes, but this is a rather slow and time-consuming activity, since my Pali is not that good. And I have to check every word rather carefully and figure out the grammatical construction. What I’m planning to do in the next year or so, when I write up much of the content of these talks into book form, is to translate the relevant sections of the Pali canon that I am citing and
quoting in my writing. I don’t plan to translate entire suttas, merely a sentence here, a paragraph there, and a verse there.

Anne
One of the things I’m intrigued to hear about is the implications of your exposition of creating a path on how we approach meditation practice.

Stephen Batchelor
Okay. So the question has to do with given my particular perspective on Buddhism, how does one approach meditation practice?

Well, again, my particular approach, in some ways is a bit of a fundamentalist one. It goes back to the most primary texts that I can find, and tries to build up, as it were, a view of Buddhism from the ground up, having extracted or having somehow put into brackets, all those elements that you find in the Buddha’s teachings that were already there in the pre-existent, Indian culture.

So the forms of meditation practice that pre-existed the Buddha were largely sort of devotional concentration exercises, a form of meditation that is described again and again in the Upanishads, where you basically turn the mind inwards, into an awareness of some sort of transcendent self or God. There’s a very strong current in the Buddha’s time, in those early texts of the Upanishads where meditation is really about denying the reality of the empirical world and recognising the Brahman or, God, or your true self, is not the empirical world.

So, the practice of meditation in the Upanishads is very much one of returning one’s identity to that of Brahman, one’s true self, a union with the divine. And this is achieved, often by this very famous method called neti neti. In other words, whatever you experience you say, not this, not this, not this. So if you have a thought, God is not this, if you see a flower, God is not this. So by subtracting every detail of your phenomenal experience, you then clear the way for a return to the transcendent reality of just pure consciousness and bliss and self.

The Buddha, I think, is doing exactly the opposite. The Buddha is effectively telling us to pay attention to the phenomenal world itself. This is what is such a radical departure from his culture, his times. Instead of saying, ‘Not this, not this’, the Buddha is effectively saying ‘this, this, this’. There’s a striking degree to which he uses the day tick pronoun. In other words, the this or that drives the practice of mindfulness. He lists the most ordinary and mundane things. He says, just look at your breath, your long breath, your short breath, the breath coming in, the breath going out. Look at the way you’re aware of how you carry your bowl, and wear your robes, and walk forward, and walk backwards.
We’re used to that but try to imagine how that must have sounded to somebody who is concerned with achieving some sort of transcendent mystical awareness, to suddenly have to attend to the phenomena of daily life: how you carry your bowl, how you breathe, how you pay attention to your bodily sensations, how you just notice what’s happening as it arises from moment to moment.

And how you emphasise and bring to consciousness the fact that this phenomenal world is changing, that it’s shot full of dukkha, of poignancy, of tragedy, of unreliability. The whole emphasis is different.

My approach to meditation practice would be largely that which follows from suttas such as the Satipatthana Sutta. On the other hand, I think, in the in the last two and a half thousand years, Buddhist practitioners from different countries in Asia have developed forms of meditation practice as well, some of which develop on the mindfulness theme, and others which bring in other elements as well.

Again, it’s a question of really finding what is useful and what is working for you. Whether that be reflective meditation, you know, think thinking about what the Buddha taught, whether it be more concentration practice, whether it be generating loving kindness. I think all of these approaches are entirely fine, I don’t have a problem with them, but as long as one is clear about the primary sort of template within which the Buddha presented the practice of meditation.

So, if we think of meditation primarily as a heightening and desensitising of awareness, such that we become more crucially conscious of the transient nature of things, the dukkha nature of things, the anatta, the not self, the fact that things do not exist in and of themselves, the idea of emptiness, and so on, as long as our meditation is one in which we are exploring and opening up the nature of the phenomenal world and its contingency and its conditioned nature, then I think any practice that somehow advances that consciousness and somehow makes it more real for us would be entirely in keeping with what I felt the Buddha taught. I’d have more difficulty with practices that somehow are seeking for some unconditioned awareness of any kind.

**Caz Sheldon**

Okay, I’m trying to phrase this question, and I’m not quite sure quite how to do it. I think it’s because I’ve got a little bit confused by the issue of atheism or not atheism in relation to the Buddha. And that’s because he was not talking from a monotheistic context. So all those things that he has to say about Brahman and the various other gods are we going to treat
them as metaphors or allegories? And why is there an issue about one about him being atheistic or otherwise, because I never thought it was an issue anyway?

**Stephen Batchelor**

Well, at one level, I think this is an issue because it’s an issue in our culture and our time. An enormous literature has recently started being published by people like Richard Dawkins and others in which they’re taking issue with theism. So the question I think we really have to address first before pursuing your point, Caz, is what in fact do I mean, by theism, and therefore what do I mean by atheism or non-theism?

I would define theism, initially, as any belief in the existence of some sort of transcendent entity or being or consciousness, or some sort of intelligence that somehow is not an integral part of the phenomenal or the conditioned world. So any religious system, and I think you’ll find some forms of Buddhism would also in be included here, that posit as central to their belief and their practice the existence of some transcendent, what I sometimes call a privileged religious object, whether that be a god, whether that be a monotheistic God, whether it be the God of the Upanishads, whether it be Zoroaster, doesn’t really matter. Or whether it be some sort of supernatural intelligence, this would be one of the beliefs nowadays, in the whole argument around evolution and intelligent design.

I think a lot of Hindu Buddhist type people might have abandoned the idea of God as a kind of person, which is not something very strong in Hinduism, at least in Upanishadic Hinduism, and have opted instead for some sort of transcendent consciousness, or awareness. Or they talk in terms of say, The Unconditioned. All of this, to me is a form of theism.

In other words it’s refusing to be satisfied, or to consider the phenomenal world to be adequate, that there has to be something else, whether that something else be deep down inside oneself, or whether it be way out there transcending all conditions, in some sort of absolute realm, I don’t think really matters.

Now, if you look at theism in a broader way, it includes both monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions, and it also includes the more Hindu Upanishadic views of God. I think it would also include certain Buddhist beliefs in doctrines such as Buddha nature, and some sort of absolute awareness or something like that. My sense in reading the Pali texts is the Buddha is suspicious of any such attempt to raise up to a kind of absolute, unconditioned status, anything at all – be it a God, be it a consciousness, be it whatever.

And so in that sense, I think the Buddha is quite clearly not a theist, but since some of his comments are actually very critical of that approach then I think it’s fair to call him an atheist.
But an atheist, again, as I’ve defined it, so it’s true that, in some respects, one might read these passages in the Digha Nikaya and so on as somehow allegorical. One could certainly do that. And I think clearly they are allegorical in that I don’t think one is expected to think that these events literally happened in historical time. When this monk goes to speak to these various gods, and so on, is clearly more in the nature of allegory. But that’s really a point being made about the literary style of the text which in a sense is secondary I feel to the more root issue of particular beliefs about the nature and status of an entity which we might call God.

Caz Sheldon
I think that clarifies it for me. My key question, though, is how do you define phenomenology? Because there are a lot of things that could be called phenomena, such as the five senses, all that long list that you get in the Satipatthana Sutta about different types of experience. Would you classify those as phenomena? Because I would tend not to.

Stephen Batchelor
Well, you see, phenomenon is a Greek word originally, and it it comes from the Greek phenomeni, which means to appear. So the phenomenal world is the world that appears, in other words what the Buddha would have summarised under the 12 ayatana – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, bodily sensation and mental content and the five senses. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, organs, that when they meet with the objects of the senses, then we can speak of consciousness of sound or consciousness of vision taking place.

The Buddha lays this out very, very clearly that either in the 12 ayatanas, the 12 sense fields, the 18 elements or even the five khandas, all of these are descriptions of what we can call the phenomenal world. In other words, the world as it appears, but mediated through the senses of the body. That is the world the Buddha is concerned with. I think the fact that he gives so much emphasis to these primary categories is, again, a bit of a snub and a critique of the pre-existing religious tradition that sought to find some kind of union with God. It’s a totally different approach.

Vanessa Moon
Does your idea of the self, of self-creating persons, include any notion of interbeing or the transpersonal?

Stephen Batchelor
Interbeing or the transpersonal, these to me are two quite different things. Interbeing is a term that Thich Nhat Hanh coined as a translation of the Pali paṭiccasamuppāda, dependent or codependent origination.
The transpersonal, as in transpersonal psychology, refers to any kind of understanding or any kind of influence that occurs in our lives that is not uniquely that of the person. And I think I see where you’re going with this one now.

**Vanessa Moon**
I’m glad you do, because I’m not sure if I know where I’m going, but carry on.

**Stephen Batchelor**
Oh, you don’t? Okay, then I won’t assume that either. But certainly, you see, as the as the rigidity of ego or self begins to break down, what also breaks down is our sense of being somehow closed off and disconnected from the wider, if you want to use the word transpersonal, world of interbeing, to use that language.

Part of the problem, I think, human beings suffer from, is that we are too deeply invested in our personal reality. And as we notice in meditation, for example, at least this happens for me, when I sit down and my mind starts wandering, what do I think about? Well, me, it’s my story that keeps running through my head. And simple meditation makes one aware of how self-preoccupied we are.

So once you start to notice that this ego or self is not actually identical or reducible to say, your feelings, or your body, or your thoughts, or whatever, once you begin thereby to break down a bit, this fixation and preoccupation with me, one consequence among many is that you become much more sensitised and conscious of how much you depend on others. How you depend, for example, on the trees that generate the chlorophyll that keeps the whole, oxygenation of the air going, how you are dependent on your parents, how you’re dependent on your employers, how you’re dependent upon your clients, how you’re dependent upon just pretty much everything ready.

So that the wearing down of the kind of compulsive ego is, in fact, simultaneously an opening up to the interconnected reality of the phenomenal world, what we might call interbeing. And in that sense, it’s also opening ourselves up to the fact that we are in fact, just a tiny speck within a much wider system of events, which we could call the transpersonal.

**Landa van den Berg**
Hello, Stephen, this is Landa. I’m a Dutch girl living in Wellington. I won’t formulate my question in Dutch, but in English. Stephen, it is about one of the things you said tonight in response to the question about the Goenka approach. You used the words, ‘this is someone else claiming an authority’. And probably what I’m looking for is your advice in how to deal with other Buddhist traditions, because if I listened to your teachings, they make so much
sense for me. And so how to avoid to become judgmental or have ideas about disqualifying other more traditional approaches. I also heard you talk during, I think, the talk we listened to last week, about your high respect for some of your really wise and very traditional teachers.

**Stephen Batchelor**

Well, I think this is a tricky question, because every Buddhist tradition, and even every person like myself, will cite some sort of text as a basis for their authority. In fact, what I’m doing is in some respects exactly the same as Mr. Goenka, Mr. Goenka is looking for passages that will back up his point of view. I look for passages that will back up my point of view, the difference is I don’t think Mr. Goenka will find any. [Laughter] He might I mean find one or two, but I don’t think you’ll find anything as specific as he would really need to be able to give authority for his particular technique. I just don’t think it exists in the canon.

Now, again, many Buddhist traditions in the west would start by disputing the the prime authenticity of, say, the Pali texts. The Mahayana schools, for example, would not give them the sort of authority that I do. Or they would say, well, we have these other teachings, the Mahayana sutras and tantras. And then we have the Zen records, and we have this, that and the other. So you’ve got a big problem simply in terms of agreeing with other Buddhists as to what actually counts as the word of the Buddha. This is a big issue.

If you are with a Buddhist group that gives primacy to, say, a different set of canonical materials – let’s say in Sanskrit, rather than Pali – how then do you actually have a dialogue? There are some rather deep academic questions concerning the respective validities of different aspects of the Buddhist tradition, that claim to be the word of the Buddha.

Others might claim that what they’re teaching is not actually the word of the historical Buddha but it’s the word of someone who achieved enlightenment, just as the Buddha did, but perhaps in China or Tibet or somewhere else. And that text for those people would have comparable authority to the Pali canon, for example.

So those are scholarly questions. Unfortunately, they’re bound to come up whenever you try to somehow make sense of, or have some meaningful dialogue with somebody coming from a Buddhist tradition other than your own. And that, I think, is one of the challenges of our time. I think one has to be very careful to avoid certain extreme positions. Probably, the first extreme position we could outline is an insistence that only a particular body of texts or a particular tradition of interpretation is valid, all others are somehow either inferior or wrong. And unfortunately, we do find that kind of position amongst all religious people, including Buddhists.
The other extreme would be to say, actually it doesn’t really matter, all of these texts, they’re coming out of the Buddhist tradition, they’re all expressions of enlightenment, they’re all fine. And we give them all equal value. That, I believe, is going way too far as well. Part of the problem with that view is that you’ll find within that wide range of materials all sorts of internal contradictions. If the texts are contradicting each other, which ones do we choose? Thus we end up in some respects back where we started.

So each of us, I think, has to somehow find our own way around this in this labyrinth, because that’s really what it is. At the same time, we need to be careful not to identify particular people with the opinions and views that they might hold. In other words, to respect the integrity of teachers and practitioners within all lineages, even though they may hold understandings or views about Buddhist practice, or the nature of Buddhist thought, which might be different from one’s own. If you don’t have that mutual respect, there’s no real possibility for engaging in a dialogue, because you’re basically coming from either a defensive or from an aggressive point of view.

I know that’s very general, but without going into specific instances, I don’t think I can really be more precise than that.

**Landa van den Berg**

It is helpful. Thank you. The one thing that struck me, though, was you’re mentioning the two extremes: on one hand, practitioners who think this is the truth and everything else is wrong; and on the other hand, those who say, well, all texts are true and valid. And you see, didn’t seem to have heard that latter idea, either. While in one of your talks, you were talking about Buddhism as a tradition, being impermanent and in constant flux, and transition too. So why wouldn’t that one opinion about all texts have equal validity? Why wouldn’t that be?

**Stephen Batchelor**

Why wouldn’t that be a problem? Why would that be a problem? Well, there are two answers to that. First of all, if you recognise Buddhism as an historical phenomenon, as something that is impermanent and always changing, then of course, it generates bodies of texts and bodies of writing which are appropriate to particular situations and times. And so you can accept in a very literal way, as I would try to do that, yes, all texts have validity, but that validity is specific to particular times and places in history, and it may therefore not be valid now.

So in the early Buddhist texts, for example, they speak of Mt Meru at the centre of the universe, and the earth as a continent in a sea and around Mt Meru, and all kinds of cosmological details that were perfectly useful in their time. But I don’t think one can give any validity to that now.
You can, of course, extend that same argument to doctrines like karma, rebirth, and so on, which I would argue were simply a part of the Indian worldview of the Buddha's time and subsequent centuries, but perhaps are not useful any more. So the changing nature of Buddhism does allow us to recognise the broad validity of everything that has been produced in these two and a half thousand years, because it was a response, and one hopes it was a legitimate response, to a particular need at a particular time in the history of the tradition.

But even then, one has to look at internal consistency within the Buddhist tradition. There are movements historically in which a teaching is given that seems to go against what the Buddha set out initially, and actually return to ideas that the Buddha himself rejected. One example of this would be the emphasis on the importance of the guru or the spiritual teacher as someone to whom one has to give complete obedience and allegiance. This is not an idea the Buddha promoted in the early canon, and yet it is one that you find in the Upanishads.

So you can see within the history of Buddhism, too, movements and shifts which either further develop the Buddha’s distinctive stance, or which sometimes seem to go back to ideas that he himself rejected. This would be another criterion.

Finally, though, I think the important point is to acknowledge that we are in a very transitional period with Buddhism in our modern world, that we are exposed to a diversity of different schools and practices and ideas and so on. And that we’re going to have to, at some level, use our own imagination and our own critical thinking, to make sense of and to arrive at a form of the dharma that speaks to our condition, and also speaks to the condition of the world that is of our time, rather than the time of say, ancient Japan.

Signe Christensen
My name is Signe. I’m living in New Zealand, but come from California. When I first heard you talk of secular Buddhism, I think I was looking for something like practical Buddhism. At the end of your talks, I don’t remember exactly the wording, you said something about taking Buddhism and putting it into action, you know living in the world, not just sitting on the zafu, in a hall. I was curious as to how you see that progression. I find myself studying the paramis and seeing if, in fact, I have more generosity in my being since I’ve been practicing Buddhism, things like that. Do you have a process or something that when you go out into the world, you’re not just following your breath. You’re doing things that feel that they’re sensitive and honest and caring.

Stephen Batchelor
It’s a big question, and I think it’s a very important question. It’s certainly something I feel very strongly about, that if our Buddhist practice is something which is primarily self-indulgent, in other words, something we do to gain a little bit of spiritual wellbeing, but doesn't really seem to impact upon our relationships in the world itself, then one would perhaps have to question its usefulness.

Why are you doing it? Are you using Buddhism or Buddhist meditation as a kind of salve or some sort of medication for calming down? Or is there actually more to it and I suspect most of us will immediately say, there's more to it than that.

But then the question arises, ‘Well, how do you integrate these practises and values and so forth and so on?’ I think on one level, every day of our life is a challenge to both integrate ideas, to pursue certain practices, let’s say, and at the same time to articulate and respond to situations that come up in the course of our day over which we probably have little control, and which come upon us, often out of left field, and we find ourselves having to be compassionate or wise or tolerant, whichever particular Buddhist virtue is called for that time.

In other words, most of us in this conversation don’t have have the luxury of being able to retreat to some monastic solitude and spend years and years and years in a quiet, peaceful place, and then one day decide to graciously return back to civilisation. The fact is, we are going through that process on a microcosmic scale, every day.

Nonetheless, I do think that many of us question whether our practice would be enhanced or improved if we could take significant stretches of time away from daily life, whether that might be taking a sabbatical year, or whether it would mean going into a three-month retreat, or whether it would mean going off and staying in Thailand for six months. Whatever it is, I think these periods are very useful. And I think they’re particularly useful because we’re not brought up in a culture that gives much importance, say, to mindfulness or to concentration, or to even values like compassion.

And so periods of one’s life in which one does detach oneself from the cut and thrust of daily living, I think, can be enormously fulfilling. They can allow us a much deeper sense of self-understanding of what really matters in our lives. They enable us to experience for ourselves, maybe a greater stillness, a greater clarity of mind in meditation, which again, allows us to gain insight into the nature of our experience, the nature of our existence. And that, I think, provides us with an experiential basis, much more grounded in our own first hand, mind body experience with which we could then be in better stead, one would hope, for returning to say a job or returning to our life with our families, or whatever it might be.
But again, broadly speaking, I think each of us has to find our own rhythm. We also have to respect our own particular dispositions and temperaments. Some people are more naturally outward going than others, others are more gifted in more reflective work. Each of us has our particular package of skills and we certainly don’t want to pretend that we’re someone other than we really are. In that way, to somehow keep in mind, this larger picture of a practice that is not reducible either to private spiritual experiences, or to overt acts of compassion, or whatever, in the world in which we lived.

To me the great metaphor of what the Buddha spoke is the eightfold path, which starts as we know with the way we see the world, and it moves on to thinking speaking, acting, living. The Buddha seems, from the very outset, to have emphasised a practice that is not actually split into two: an inner practice and an outer practice. That very distinction, I think, is slightly problematic.

Instead, I feel that he presented the notion of a trajectory, a path which starts with a kind of vision, but culminates in forms and action, which then become the foundation for deepening our vision. In one of my talks, I referred to a feedback loop rather than a linear progression from A to Z. If one keeps that feedback loop model in mind, that all of these elements are part of our lives kind of all the time, whether they’ve actually been put into action or not, then I think one has a good model for living one’s life to the full in as many different aspects of one’s behaviour as possible.

**Chris**

You mentioned earlier that the self is a process that we’re responsible for. This concept of self I do struggle with slightly, or the concept of no self, really, there being no fixed self doesn’t mean therefore, that we can acknowledge there is a self who has authority moment by moment, and who can look in on one’s own thought experiences or life experiences, but acknowledging that that self changes moment by moment.

**Stephen Batchelor**

Yeah, this is a tricky issue. I don't want to make light of it by giving some sort of pat response.

You see, we use this word self very easily. But when we start to look for this self, that sometimes seems so real, it’s actually rather difficult to pin down, it’s rather elusive, it doesn’t actually have the kind of reality it appears to have most of the time. As you say, it appears that there is some kind of a self as a kind of authority, someone who makes decisions, someone who chooses to do this rather than that, somebody who, in a way is a moral agent. And there’s no sense at all in which the Buddha is trying to deny the fact that each person or each self is a
responsible moral agent who makes decisions and choices. That’s not a problem. That’s good, okay. That was me.

The problem arises in the extent to which we exaggerate the reality of this sense we have of me, or of self. And this, I think, is almost a kind of psychosomatic feeling that we have, it’s quite difficult to describe. But it’s something that is almost certainly produced by the organism itself. In other words, this notion of a fixed self is probably something that has its beginnings in our own evolutionary past. One can see how in earlier societies, which were less privileged and prosperous than ours, that to have a firm sense of self or firm conviction that you and your family and friends would somehow survive to the next season, when the harvest would be reaped, this would give you a kind of confidence and conviction that might give you crucial survival advantages over the members of the neighbouring tribe.

So I think that the sense of self is deeply embedded in our neurobiology. Therefore it’s not going to just vanish if we do a few weekends of meditation. It’s probably always going to be there.

So I think we have to recognise that the appearance of a fixed self is probably a given in most of human experience. In some senses, it’s a bit like the fact that we get up in the morning, we see the sun rise in the east, and we watch it traverse the sky, and then set in the evening in the west. It’s indisputable to our senses that that is what is happening, that this ball of heat moves from east to west in the course of 12 hours, or whatever. And yet we know that that’s not actually the case. We know, in fact, that the earth is moving and the sun is standing still. So things happen in our daily experience which we know are actually not as they appear.

I think the same sort of awareness can be given to the status of oneself. The self appears to be permanent and detached, and somewhat disassociated from the body mind. But this is, again, rather like the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. It’s actually a consequence of the fact of living at a particular scale in a particular organism and the particular history in a particular place. As soon as we start to reflect on the nature of self, and that means to look into, say, the emergence of the firing of neurons in the brain to the interactions we have with the environment to the history and development of our own life, the growth of our own body, we can see that there is nothing in all of that that has remained fixed and unchanged and somehow not contingent upon all of the different elements that have formed us.

We know that. I don’t think that’s a terribly remarkable claim to make. The Buddha made it. But then people speaking in cognitive science and in certain forms of philosophy and psychology in the west will also speak of the self in these ways. There’s no Buddhist
monopoly on this idea. In fact, it’s strikingly congruent with a great deal of what is coming out of the understanding of the human being from other fields.

So we have, I think, on the one hand just to live with the fact of this fiction, and also at the same time not to believe in it. To recognise that it is worth acting, that we can effect significant changes within our lives, that we do not have to remain the fixed neurotic ego that we sometimes think we are, that change is actually possible. Although that change may not be something that will happen in your next 45 minutes sitting on a zafu, but it might be something you’ll discern over the course of the months and the years as you go about your life seeking to integrate the sorts of values that matter to you most.

Chris
Can I ask about one further thing, which is related: the concept of fairly stable individual personality traits, for example, that one’s friends and family might observe that persist for some years, and that one uses to describe oneself, I guess. So although not fixed, they are fairly stable, perhaps. How do you account for that?

Stephen Batchelor
Well, in the same way that your body remains more or less constant too, there are relative constants. I think we account for that, to some extent because the human organism has found a kind of homeostasis with its environment, in which it’s able simply to repeat similar patterns again, and again, and again. And these might be being triggered by DNA sequences or whatever. I don’t know. Or simply grooved neural networks that have become somehow established over time.

And yet, we could also notice as with the ageing of the body, that there is also subtle change. So, for example, you often hear stories of, or you may have had this experience yourself, you don’t meet an old school friend for 20 or 30 years. And yes, it is still the same person, but often, we notice that that something rather central or something rather, crucial has also changed in that person. Sometimes that change is quite striking. We say, ‘My God, you’re not the person I remember’. In other words, on a day to day, week to week basis, working with our family, seeing the same friends, children, colleagues, we don’t notice those changes, which nonetheless are occurring, and we prefer instead to be more convinced of the apparent regularities.

But those apparent regularities, I think, are functionally necessary for them to be consistent to, for that consistency in how we relate to one another. But, at the same time, we also need to notice that in the long term, they can change, they are variable, and a person can become
in a way someone else, not utterly different from who they were, but nonetheless not exactly the same either.

**Stephen Batchelor**
Ramsey, where are we with time?

**Ramsey Margolis**
It’s now half past eight in New Zealand, so we’ve been going for slightly more than an hour. Does anybody else have another question for now, or do we want to wrap it up shortly? Is there anything, Stephen, that you’d like to add before we wrap up?

**Stephen Batchelor**
As I mentioned to you, Ramsey, the more recent set of talks based on the same material is now posted at Dharmaseed. You have the details. You might find some of those talks interesting because they do take some of the material and they develop the ideas, in some sense quite a bit.

But apart from that, no, I’m just glad that you found what I’ve said to be of sufficient interest to spend an evening a week for the last seven weeks listening to these things. I hope very much that these ideas continue to be of value both individually and also in terms of your own community in New Zealand, and perhaps who knows one day we may actually meet in the flesh via rather than online.

**Bruce Staples**
That was actually the burning question I was going to ask: when are we going to be seeing you in person?

**Stephen Batchelor**
That’s entirely up to you. You can get on a plane, and you can come on retreat in England, but I presume you mean in New Zealand. Martine and I are thinking of possibly going to the Antipodes in 2010. Next year, I’m taking a sort of sabbatical to write a book. The following year, we already have commitments in the USA, so in 2010, when we will not have an American trip to make it’s possible that we might come down to Australia and New Zealand.

**Ramsey Margolis**
Okay, there are 14 of us around the table here in Wellington, and people around the country have also been listening to the talks that we sent them to them on a CD, and that we have been recording this particular discussion. So, among us here in New Zealand, has anybody else got anything to say? Now is your opportunity or hold your peace for the next three years.
We might be able to engage with you in some other similar thing again, at some point before you come here.

Stephen Batchelor
Sure I mean, this is so easy to do. We can always set up a discussion like this. No problem. Okay, I just have to get up.

Ramsey Margolis
So let’s end by saying good luck on the book and thank you very much.

Stephen Batchelor
Thank you, Ramsey.

Ramsey Margolis
Kia ora and good night from New Zealand. Good night. This has been great.

ENDS • 8580 words