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Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening. By Stephen Batchelor. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997. Pp. xii + 127. ISBN 1-57322-058-2, US \$21.95.

Reviewed by

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

President, Buddhist Publication Society
(Kandy, Sri Lanka)
Email: bps@mail.lanka.net

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It has often been said that Western Buddhism is distinguished from its Asian prototype by three innovative shifts: the replacement of the monastery by the lay community as the principal arena of Buddhist practice; the enhanced position of women; and the emergence of a grass-roots engaged Buddhism aimed at social and political transformation. These three developments, however, have been encompassed by a fourth which is so much taken for granted that it is barely noticed. This last innovation might be briefly characterized as an attempt to transplant Buddhist practice from its native soil of faith and doctrine into a new setting governed by largely secular concerns. For Asian Buddhists, including Eastern masters teaching in the West, this shift is so incomprehensible as to be invisible, while Western Buddhists regard it as so obvious that they rarely comment on it.

Stephen Batchelor, however, has clearly discerned the significance of this development and what it portends for the future. Having been trained in Asia in two monastic lineages (Tibetan Gelugpa and Korean Soen) and relinquished his monk's vows to live as a lay Buddhist teacher in the West, he is acquainted with both traditional Buddhism and its Western offshoots. His book *Buddhism without Beliefs* is an intelligent and eloquent attempt to articulate the premises of the emerging secular Buddhism and define the parameters of a "dharma practice" appropriate to the new situation. Batchelor is a highly gifted writer with a special talent for translating abstract explanation into concrete imagery drawn from everyday life. His book is obviously the product of serious reflection and a deep urge to make the Dhamma viable in our present sceptical age. Whether his vision is adequate to that aim is a tantalizing question that I hope to explore in this review.

The book is divided into three parts, each with several short sections. In the first part, entitled "Ground," Batchelor sketches the theoretical framework of his "Buddhism without beliefs." He begins by drawing a sharp distinction between two entities so closely intertwined in Buddhist history that they seem inseparable, but which, he holds, must be severed for the Dhamma to discover its contemporary relevance. One is "dharma practice," the Buddha's teaching as a path of training aimed at awakening and freedom from "anguish" (his rendering of dukkha); the other is "Buddhism," a system of beliefs and observances geared towards social stability and religious consolation. For Batchelor, the religious expressions and worldview in which the Dhamma has come down to us have no intrinsic connection to the core of the Buddha's teaching. They pertain solely to the Asian cultural soil within which Buddhism took root. While they may have served a purpose in earlier times, in relation to the continuing trans-

mission of the Dhamma, they are more a hindrance than a help.

According to Batchelor, if the Dhamma is to offer an effective alternative to mainstream thought and values, it must be divested of its religious apparel and recast in a purely secular mode. What then emerges is an “agnostic” style of dharma practice aimed at personal and social liberation from the suffering created by egocentric clinging. On the great questions to which religious Buddhism provides answers—the questions concerning our place in the grand scheme of things—Batchelor’s agnostic version of the Dhamma takes no stand. In his view “the dharma is not something to believe in but something to do” (p. 17).

At first glance, Batchelor’s approach seems to echo the Buddha’s advice in his famous simile about the man struck with the poisoned arrow (MN no. 63): “Just practice the path and don’t speculate about metaphysical questions.” However, are the two really pointing in the same direction? I don’t think so. Batchelor seems curiously ambivalent about his purpose relative to the historical Buddha. He begins as if he intended to salvage the authentic vision of the Buddha from the cultural accretions that have obscured its pristine clarity; yet, when he runs up against principles taught by the Buddha that collide with his own agenda, he does not hesitate to discard them. This suggests more than cultural accretions are at stake.

From the Buddha’s silence on the metaphysical questions of his day and his teaching’s focus on suffering and its cessation, Batchelor concludes that the Buddha’s teaching should be viewed as “an existential, therapeutic, and liberating agnosticism” (p. 15). A look at the Pāli suttas, however, will show us that while the Buddha did not answer the ten “undetermined questions,” he made quite explicit pronouncements on questions that Batchelor would wave aside. In a telling passage, Batchelor states that an agnostic Buddhist would not turn to the dharma to answer questions about “where we came from, where we are going, what happens after death . . . [but] would seek such knowledge in the appropriate domains: astrophysics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, etc.” (p. 18). From Batchelor’s point of view, this implies that in his metaphysical comments, the Buddha was stepping outside his own domain and trespassing on that of science—doubly ironic, since responsible scientists usually admit such questions are unanswerable or belong in the domain of religion rather than science.

Batchelor tries to escape this predicament by suggesting that, in speaking of rebirth, the Buddha was merely adopting “the symbols, metaphors, and imagery of his world” (p. 15). However, he later admits that the Buddha “accepted” the ideas of rebirth and kamma, yet he still finds it “odd that a practice concerned with anguish and the ending of anguish should be obliged to adopt ancient Indian metaphysical theories and thus accept as an

article of faith that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of brain function” (p. 37). Batchelor cannot endorse these “metaphysical theories.” While he does not reject the idea of rebirth, he claims that the most honest approach we can take to the whole issue of life after death is simply acknowledging that we don’t know. Accepting the doctrines of rebirth and kamma, even on the authority of the Buddha, indicates a “failure to summon forth the courage to risk a nondogmatic and nonevasive stance on such crucial existential matters” (p. 38).

To justify his interpretation of the Dhamma, Batchelor uses arguments that gain their cogency through selective citation, oversimplification, and rationalization. For example, when discussing the “four ennobling truths,” Batchelor points out (in accordance with the First Sermon) that these truths are “not propositions to believe [but] challenges to act” (p. 7). This, however, is only partly true: in order to act upon truths, one has to believe them. More pointedly, Batchelor fails to acknowledge that the tasks imposed by the truths acquire their meaning from a specific context—the quest for liberation from the vicious cycle of rebirths (see MN no. 26; SN chap. 15). Lifting the four Noble Truths out of their original context shared by the Buddha and his adherents and transposing them into a purely secular framework alters their meaning in crucial ways. We see this when Batchelor interprets the first truth as “existential anguish.” For the Buddha and subsequent sacred tradition, dukkha really means the suffering of repeated becoming in the round of rebirths. Thus, if one dismisses the idea of rebirth, the Four Truths lose their depth and scope.

The sharp dichotomy that Batchelor posits between “dharma practice” and “religious Buddhism” also is hard to endorse. Rather, we should recognize a spectrum of Buddhist practices, ranging from simple devotional and ethical observances to more advanced contemplative and philosophical explorations. What makes them specifically part of the Buddhist Dhamma is that they are all enfolded in a distinctive matrix of faith and understanding that disappears when “dharma practice” is pursued based on different presuppositions. Batchelor describes the premises that underlie traditional lay Buddhist practice, such as kamma and rebirth, as mere “consolatory elements” that have crept in to the Dhamma and blunted its critical edge (pp. 18-19). Yet, to speak thus is to forget that such principles were repeatedly taught by the Buddha himself, and not always for the sake of consolation, as a glance through the Pāli Nikāyas would show.

Even the notion that Buddhist religiosity is defined by a set of now-unquestioned beliefs seems to derive its plausibility from viewing Buddhism in terms of a Christian model. Dhamma practice as taught by the Buddha makes no demands for blind faith; the invitation to question and

investigate is always extended. One first approaches the Dhamma by testing those teachings of the Buddha that come into the range of one's own experience. If they stand up under scrutiny, one then places faith in the teacher and accepts on trust those points of his teaching that one cannot personally validate. Collectively, all these principles make up Right View (*sammā ditṭhi*), the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path. Subjecting the principles to insistent agnostic questioning, as Batchelor proposes, derails one's practice from the start. In the Buddha's version of the path, one begins with certain beliefs that serve as guidelines to Right Understanding and Right Practice. Then, when one's practice matures, initial belief is transcended by personal realization based on insight. Once one arrives at the far shore, one can leave behind the entire raft (see MN no. 22), but one doesn't discard the compass before one has even stepped on board.

The middle portion of the book is called "Path" and provides a sketch of Batchelor's agnostic conception of dharma practice. His explanations here are clear and lively, allowing him to display the creative side of his literary gifts. Separate sections deal with mindful awareness, insight into emptiness, and the development of compassion, each introduced by a simple example. He illustrates the practice of mindfulness by the unmindful way we usually perform everyday tasks, like walking to the store for a carton of milk. Emptiness is revealed in the challenge of finding a ballpoint pen amidst its parts, and compassion comes from reflecting on the suffering common to those we consider our friends, enemies, and mere acquaintances. He also includes a section on the twelve links of dependent origination, which he interprets in an imaginative way, illustrated by the mistaken perception of a garden hose as a snake.

Notably absent in Batchelor's conception of the path is the traditional foundation for Buddhist practice: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. Of course, such an obviously religious act hardly makes sense in the framework of agnostic dharma practice. This omission, however, is quite significant, I think, because a world of difference must separate the practice of the agnostic dharma follower from that of the confirmed Buddhist who has gone for refuge. Batchelor mentions no code of moral rules, not even the Five Precepts. At several points, in fact, he speaks lightly of the codification of ethics, proposing moral integrity in its place. While his analysis of moral integrity includes some impressive insights, it remains questionable to me whether integrity alone, without concrete guidelines, is a sufficient basis for ethics.

In the final part, "Fruition," Batchelor explores the consequences of his conception of dharma practice as a "passionate agnosticism." He begins with an account of the meditative path that strikes me as very strange.

As mindfulness develops, he explains, the process of meditation evolves into a radical, relentless questioning of every aspect of experience, until we find ourselves immersed in a profound perplexity that envelopes our whole being. For Batchelor, “this perplexed questioning is the central path itself” (p. 98), a path that does not seek any answers nor even a goal. For one like myself, nurtured on the Pāli texts, this seems a bizarre conception of “dharma practice.” Granted, the purpose of meditation is not simply to gain confirmation of one’s belief system, but does this justify using the raft of the Dhamma to founder in the treacherous sea of doubt, rather than to cross to the far shore? The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that insight meditation leads to direct knowledge of the true nature of things, a knowledge that pulls up doubt by its roots. This shows again the bearing of one’s starting point on one’s destination. If one starts off with the agnostic imperative, one descends ever deeper into mystery and doubt; if one places trust in the Dhamma and accedes to Right View, one’s path culminates in Right Knowledge and Right Liberation (see MN no. 117).

In the last sections of the book, on “imagination” and “culture,” Batchelor tackles the problem of the encounter between Buddhism and the contemporary world. He points out that throughout its history, the Dhamma has rejuvenated itself by continually altering its forms to respond to changing social and cultural conditions. This creative adjustment was an act of imagination, of creative vision, on the part of gifted Buddhist thinkers, who thereby gave birth to a fresh manifestation of the teaching. Later, however, institutionalized religious orthodoxy stepped in, placed the new forms under its authority, and thereby squelched the creative impulse imparted by the founders. Again, while I cannot deny that orthodoxy and creativity have had an uneasy relationship, I find Batchelor’s version of Buddhist history too simplistic, almost as if he were viewing Buddhist orthodoxy merely as an imitation of institutionalized control and suppression seen in Western faiths. He also fails to acknowledge sufficiently the role of orthodoxy in encouraging Dhamma practice rather than suppressing it, which has facilitated the development of accomplished spiritual masters through the centuries. Orthodoxy and contemplative realization, though often at odds with each other, are not necessarily incompatible.

Batchelor argues that the meeting of Buddhism with the contemporary West requires creation, from the resources of the dharma, of a new “culture of awakening that addresses the specific anguish of the contemporary world” (p. 110). Such a culture must respond to the unprecedented situation we find today: the promise of spiritual liberation converging with universal striving for personal and social freedom. In attempting to create such a culture of awakening, he stresses the need for dharma followers to

preserve the integrity of the Buddhist tradition while at the same time fulfilling their responsibility to the present and the future. With that much I am in full agreement, and I acknowledge that the problem is especially acute for Theravāda Buddhism, which historically has been tied to a very particular cultural environment. Nevertheless, I differ with Batchelor regarding what is central to the Dhamma and what is peripheral. In my view, Batchelor is ready to cast away too much that is integral to the Buddha's teaching in order to make it fit in with today's secular climate of thought. I'm afraid that the ultimate outcome of such concessions could be a psychologically oriented humanism tinged with Buddhist philosophy and a meditative mood. I certainly think that Buddhists should freely offer other religions and secular disciplines the full resources of their own tradition—philosophy, ethics, meditation and psychology—with perfect liberty to use them for their own ends: “The Tathāgata does not have a teacher's closed fist.” But we still have to draw a sharp line between what the Buddha's Dhamma is and what is not: I would say all such practices undertaken outside the context of Going for Refuge are still on the hither side of the Dhamma, not yet within its fold.

When the secular presuppositions of modernity clash with the basic principles of Right Understanding stressed by the Buddha, I maintain there is no question which of the two must be abandoned. *Samsāra* as the beginningless round of rebirths, kamma as its regulative law, *Nibbāna* as a transcendent goal—surely these ideas will not get a rousing welcome from sceptical minds. A sense of refuge, renunciation and compassion based on the perception of universal suffering, a striving to break all mental bonds and fetters—surely these values are difficult in an age of easy pleasure. Yet, these are all so fundamental to the true Dhamma, so closely woven into its fabric, that to delete them is to risk nullifying its liberative power. If this means that Buddhism retains its character as a religion, so be it. I see nothing to fear in this; the greater danger comes from diluting the teaching so much that its potency is lost. The secularization of life and the widespread decline in moral values have had grave consequences throughout the world, jeopardizing our collective sanity and survival. Today a vast cloud of moral and spiritual confusion hangs over humankind, and Batchelor's agnostic dharma practice seems to me a very weak antidote indeed. In my view, what we require is a clear articulation of the essential principles taught by the Buddha himself in all their breadth and profundity. The challenge—and it is a difficult one—is to express these principles in a living language that addresses the deep crises of our time.

Note

In accordance with his own convention, I have used “dharma” when quoting or closely paraphrasing Batchelor, and “Dhamma” when making general remarks and to express my own ideas.