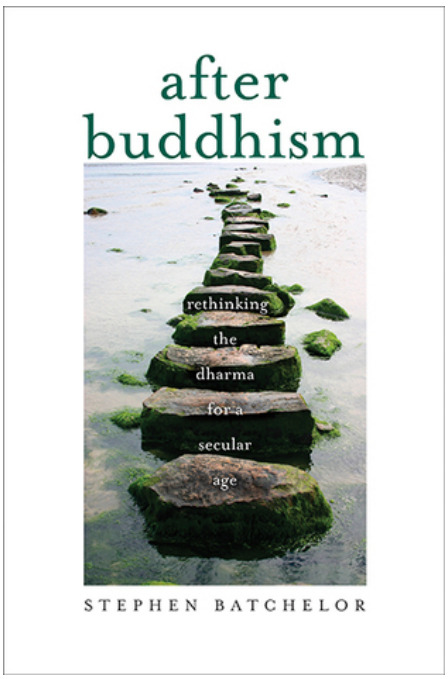

After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age

Stephen Batchelor

After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age

Stephen Batchelor

After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age Stephen Batchelor
Some twenty-five centuries after the Buddha started teaching, his message continues to inspire people across the globe, including those living in predominantly secular societies. But what does it mean to adapt religious practices to secular contexts?

Stephen Batchelor, an internationally known author and teacher, is committed to a secularized version of the Buddha's teachings. The time has come, he feels, to articulate a coherent ethical, contemplative, and philosophical vision of Buddhism for our age. *After Buddhism,* the culmination of four decades of study and practice in the Tibetan, Zen, and Theravada traditions, is his attempt to set the record straight about who the Buddha was and what he was trying to teach. Combining critical readings of the earliest canonical texts with narrative accounts of five of the Buddha's inner circle, Batchelor depicts the Buddha as a pragmatic ethicist rather than a dogmatic metaphysician. He envisions Buddhism as a constantly evolving culture of awakening, its long survival due to its capacity to reinvent itself and interact creatively with each society it encounters.

This original and provocative book presents a new framework for understanding the remarkable spread of Buddhism in today's globalized world. It also reminds us of what was so startling about the Buddha's vision of human flourishing.

After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age Details

Date	:	Published January 14th 2016 by Yale University Press (first published October 27th 2015)
ISBN	:	9780300205183
Author	:	Stephen Batchelor
Format	:	Hardcover 381 pages
Genre	:	Religion, Buddhism, Philosophy, Nonfiction, Spirituality

From Reader Review After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age for online ebook

Ken says

I learned a thing or two about the Buddha, that's for sure. For one, I always thought he was top-drawer royalty, when really he was no big deal in the royal flush of lineages of India in his day. I also learned that the famous story of his striking out from the royal grounds and discovering sickness, old age, and death is made up. That shouldn't surprise me, though. He may have told the story himself, but he didn't live it in a biographical way. Certainly, though, it fit his dharma lessons. And finally, most eye-opening, the petty politics between battling holy men. One of them even showed up at Gotama's funeral to try to seize the reins and scoop up the followers to do things HIS way. It's like presidential politics among the dharma bums. Very cool. And sad.

Batchelor divides chapters between Buddhism talk (the dharma and its history) and sketches of important persons in Gotama's lifetime. The effect is to give us various angles vs. only the one. Quite authoritative, this writer, who is a Buddhist himself. He also has no patience for strict Buddhist dogmatism. A liberal, then. The secular part marrying the Buddhism part, lest it die away entirely. That's it.

Overall, you'll feel enlightened in more ways than one.

Angela says

GOOD. Good. Actually, kind of a slog in the beginning. The first 50% of the book was a slog for me - I really struggled, ho jeez. 1-star start. But a 4-star end, really. I think I needed time to get into this: this is a DENSE book, it requires deep engagement, and that can be hard when you're trying to audiobook this on 2x speed while commuting to work and your USB-C cable keeps futzing out.

So, first recommendation: don't do this on audiobook, READ this instead.

Second recommendation: convert to Buddhism!

Third (and last) recommendation: But screw Buddhism, eh! Kill the Buddha! This was a very nice, it was deeply Buddhist in its meta (Stephen Batchelor spends the whole book dismantling common Buddhist interpretations from first principles/direct Pali sources, and criticizing established Buddhist authorities for their snobbery towards, e.g., mindfulness apps) and, of course, in its ultimate messages. (Just like Star Wars went from Zen Yoda in ESB to Shambhala-style "BURN IT DOWN!" Luke in The Last Jedi. GOOD!

So this dense book is an ambitious attempt by Stephen Batchelor to reinterpret Buddhism by going back to the earliest Pali texts about Prince Siddhartha. (If you don't know Siddhartha's life story - and the foundations of Buddhism - already, I recommend Keanu's interpretation (unironically!!!) for an easy, canonical, and fun (!) telling.) He focuses, specifically, on five "characters"/historical figures who surrounded Siddhartha, and he tries to parse out - using contextual clues and some historiography - what the true values of Siddhartha (and therefore Buddhism) would have been. Along the way, he addresses some of the bits of Buddhism that are most challenging to Westerners: reincarnation, institutional sexism, etc.

So I'm generally down with a dismantling and reconstruction of Buddhism for a modern (secular) age, since that does seem in keeping with the general spirit of Buddhism - especially irreverent and now-obsessed Zen! I liked the retelling of the "four noble truths" as more like pirate guidelines focused on contextual/relativist ethical pragmatism. Try not to be a slave to your knee-jerk reptile brain, basically!

That said, I ALSO think Batchelor may have been a little too optimistic about his reinterpretations - I recall his litmus test for "probably what Siddhartha actually said" as being anything that was NOT a cultural norm of the time. Sure, maybe? But maybe Siddhartha also agreed with some contextual goings-on.

(Side note but I loved the discussion of the catty competitiveness between Mahaveera (the founder of Jainism) and the early Buddhist community.)

The most interesting bits, actually, were about Buddhism finding its early legs during and immediately after the death of Siddhartha: there was an immediate split between conservative (who Batchelor says "won" and determined a lot of the Buddhist dogma that survives today) and liberal factions (who, Batchelor argues, reflected better the true spirit of Siddhartha's teachings). I thought this was interesting for MANY reasons:
- It mirrors the similar split in early Christianity, and its kidnapping by the charismatic dogmas of Paul versus the more mystical, squishy teachings of Jesus. (Side note: why did western Christianity never develop a mystical tradition? This was asked by Karen Armstrong and, indeed, why!)
- Batchelor's acknowledgment that maybe the conservative movement worked better at preserving Buddhism through tumultuous historical stuff rang true: e.g. behavioral economics/psych research talks a lot about how hard boundaries ("never eat meat") are much easier to enforce than soft ones ("do what you think is right"). Siddhartha specifically said, on his death, to discard the "small rules" the monks had taken on during his life - "no big deal" was his basic vibe. But the conservatives insisted on hard lines - and Batchelor notes (and I can understand!) the comfort that there is there. A hard line is easy to enforce, easy to see, easy to use. Everything else is so damn relativist and squishy! How do you know what's what?!

I liked Batchelor's VERY interesting hinting of Mara (normally a personification of evil/temptation/worldly stuff) as our limbic system, and the evolutionary importance of our limbic system (i.e. jealousy/hatred/etc are evolutionarily important). Very interesting! I liked that! The idea that we had certain tools (e.g. being an asshole; punching people) that were useful during certain times (e.g. ye olde hunter/gatherer times), but we outgrow them - and we can choose to consciously move forward. Very nice! This removes a lot of the (Judeo-Christian) guilt we're meant to feel for NOT being already enlightened super-beings, the guilt that's meant to come pre-baked in (imperfect/fallible/crappy) human nature; it ALSO jibes with my recent theorizing about how mindfulness is about putting the brakes on our reptilian-brain tendency to find patterns everywhere. Where patterns -> useful for survival in primordial human times, but now patterns + structural injustice = a bunch of racist shit and people using their evolutioned-pattern-finding-machine (i.e. their brain) to obviously immoral ends. (And now the next step forward, of algorithms and AI - which are just dumber pattern recognition machines - perpetuating these systemic injustices. If we're all getting racist training data, our pattern-finders (brains/neural nets) are gonna lead to effed up results!)

HAAAANYWAY. This got me, as dharma always does, PUMPED about more dharma stuff. Specifically, I got all tender feelings about one of my olde favorite Favorite All-Time Books, Roger Zelazny's Lord of Light - which was a zany, far future take on a type of humanistic/secular Buddhism. And I must re-read!! And you must read!

Recommended if you're already kinda into Buddhism/have practiced for a while/NOT a good beginner's book cuz you'll be like "wtf who is Bimbisara etc i give up" honestly.

the gift says

180916: this is a very interesting take on buddhism. at the beginning the author describes in his project, a desire to update buddhism of several religious interpretations with a secular understanding, born of the 2 500 years since gotama buddha is said to have lived. this is a noble intent. this requires a lot of rereading and much translation to identify exactly what early texts said, before they were 'corrupted' or 'overwritten' by descendant followers whose additions, emphasis, exclusion, of various thinkers and writings created the 'tradition', the 'canon', in view of politics and culture of the time...

i have read a few buddhism books, only in english, so i will not judge this work in the author's extensive translations. he is consistent. he is resolutely motivated by some desire to update and 'secularize' from the earliest extant work from say a hundred years after gotama's death. he gives his reading of the process of dissemination of original insights. he notes which common terms were added to express the practical, somewhat 'physician'-like, insights of the 'four noble truths' as some great, miraculous, wondrous gift that could only have come from a divine religious figure rather than a thoughtful, insightful, communicator who was human as they...

the author does not hesitate to re-translate early works and critically examine exactly when and how such generally applied concepts such as 'emptiness' of all things, can be drawn out of 'impermanence', but are in his reading not paradoxical and requiring the distinction of 'conventional truth' versus 'ultimate truth'. which means, well you just don't get it, listen to us. there is discussion of how rebirth and karma are not necessarily linked, that there was never any need to argue for these concepts in the various original cultures of buddhism, and the author usefully parallels such thought-worlds with our current natural/physical/scientific worldview in our place and time. the big bang, the extensive story of evolution by natural selection- these are generally accepted if not widely understood...

that the author returns to earliest texts both within the canon and eventually as written outside india, by the greeks, by the later europeans, is a useful way of developing a sense of early 'practice' of buddhism and also an understanding of how buddhism declined and almost disappeared in india. it is well argued that some texts are in need of newer translation, that sometimes history has been rather unkind, that there is a weight of conservatism that holds this way from maturing into a useful practical addition to our globalized world, that 'buddhism' as we know it might not be recognizable to that era...

i have read buddhism but not much practiced it. i have read a lot in general. in looking for this 'secular' version of buddhism i seem to find many references/arguments/terms to have rather more 'poetic' values and i never much worry about contradiction and paradox or just bad logic. i find this with heidegger, who is here used as well. and then, something essential i would think, is the buddha's insistence that the dharma (teaching) must make sense, must be come to not as 'revelation' but as 'argument' to each and every follower. so 'original texts' should perhaps be considered directions to explore thought, to elaborate, to render current and consistent- rather than perfect and inflexible for all time, with only ancientness validating insights. think of buddhism as practice. think of the buddha as practical ethicist and not dogmatic metaphysician. this book is not the only book to read on buddhism but best read after some other texts...

Frederik says

It would be a mistake to cast Stephen Batchelor as Buddhism's version of Harris, Hitchens, or Dawkins. Unlike the so-called New Atheists, his objective is not to destroy or ridicule but rather to reclaim the Buddha's teachings from metaphysical distractions grafted on throughout Buddhism's 2500 years of evolution. Given that the Buddha's teachings have been adapted and changed to suit the varying cultures that adopted it – from China and Japan to India, Sri Lank, Vietnam, and elsewhere – it's entirely sensible to engage with the Buddha's teachings from a Western perspective.

It's a controversial effort, of course. The secular filter through which he interprets the Buddha's teachings pulls the proverbial rug out from under many of the world's leading Buddhist traditions, presenting a dharma stripped of the deities, superstitions, and even popularly known but misunderstood metaphysical concepts such as rebirth. His Buddha is not a supernatural figure, but rather a man who, despite his spiritual accomplishment, was nevertheless still a part of the world.
Insofar as this isn't an archaeological / historical study but rather a hermeneutic effort, it would be an exaggeration to say that Batchelor is discovering the true Buddhism beneath the fluff of religious trappings. Rather, it's about understanding the Buddha's teachings in a coherent, rationally defensible way. His arguments in this regard towards a "systematic theology" are persuasive, well-reasoned, and empowered by their source in canonical texts.

Much like a purist Christian might reason from Jesus' gospel teachings rather than draw on later additions such as the Pauline epistles, Batchelor turns to the earliest written record of the Buddha's teachings, the Pali Canon, and disregards the voluminous number of texts subsequently written in later traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism. But the Pali Canon comes with a proviso. It was written 450 years after the Buddha's death, after a long tradition of oral tradition and memorization. Like the Bible, it was subject to editing by community leaders. Batchelor, quite rightly, strives to distinguish between teachings that can be reasonably ascribed to the Buddha and ideas more plausibly attributed to later political and cultural adaptation. A key concern is the extent to which Buddhism was assimilated by ascendant Hinduism and inflected with metaphysical doctrines (e.g. rebirth) along with more practical concerns for ritual and other religious/clerical trappings. (To put it differently: the moment when Buddhism transitioned from a spiritual-philosophical system to a religion.)

By way of response, we find a backlash that is startlingly similar to that of religious (e.g. Christian) apologists and defenders of paranormal claims, such as Dennis Hunter's piece at Buddhist Geeks (http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/2010/10/...). Aside from the religious perspective's inability to fully grasp atheism as a philosophical stance and not a rival religion, we find the kind of calls for open-minded science – a science not limited to reductionist materialism, as it were – that really mask the wish to hang on to dubious concepts without either a) good reason and/or b) empirical evidence. The trouble with metaphysical claims, whether God or rebirth, stems from a sort of paradox. Either the concept is so vague and incoherently defined as to be practically meaningless, or the concept is precise but stubbornly eludes any sort of experimental verification. The result, historically, tends to be a reliance on the fallacious god of the gap argument – science doesn't have all the answers, so it remains "reasonable" to believe in the truth of a metaphysical concept – or an intellectually dishonest moving of goal posts. And so it goes with concepts like karma tied to a literal understanding of reincarnation.

Regardless, as interesting as the discussion is regarding the role of metaphysics in Buddhism, it largely misses Batchelor's point, which is that path to our liberation from suffering doesn't depend on the doctrine of rebirth or any other metaphysical additions espoused by traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism, Pure Land,

and others. His speculation regarding Siddartha Gautama's biography sometimes give the impression of History Channel reenactments. But his straightforward description of the Dharma – particularly the noble truths and the eightfold path – demonstrates how the Buddha's fundamental insights are entirely relevant to the West's spiritual challenges today.

Essential reading for both practicing Buddhists, regardless of their agreement with Batchelor, and anyone interested in getting an insider's perspective on Buddhism and its relevance to the West.

John Jr. says

This sentence from the publisher's description puts it well: "Combining critical readings of the earliest canonical texts with narrative accounts of five of the Buddha's inner circle, Batchelor depicts the Buddha as a pragmatic ethicist rather than a dogmatic metaphysician." I won't attempt to assess the book; other readers here and elsewhere have done that. I'll say only that I was looking for things I can use and that I found some, among them the broad view of Buddhism as less concerned with ultimate truth than with how we live in the world, and the reminder (which I need) to avoid reactivity—that is, avoid habitual responses.

James M. Madsen, M.D. says

This was for me an exceptionally enlightening (pun intended) and enjoyable read--and listen: for parts of the book, I listened to parts of the iBooks audiobook narrated by the author and found his voice and tone to be suggestive of both care (with proper enunciation, pronunciation, and inflection) and also caring. I've read several of the reviews on Goodreads and understand how some readers can accuse Batchelor of trying to remake Buddhism to his own ends, much as Thomas Jefferson cut up a Bible of his to expunge all of the supernatural-sounding elements of the Gospels, leaving only the moral teachings of Jesus. Of course Batchelor's scholarship is tinged with his own desire to reinterpret the dharma for a secular age, and of course he may have gotten things wrong in some of his interpretations; but putting old wine into new bottles is a time-honored and essential activity, with some sanction, it seems, from the Buddha himself. Batchelor is always careful with his conclusions, open with his admissions of his own perspective, and respectful in his approach. And I for one found his recreations of parts of the lives of Gotama and his associates very humanizing and down to earth. An excellent read and a book that I highly recommend.

Josh Lovejoy says

I rated this book four stars when I was part way through it then changed it to five once I finished. The structure is tough at first because it seems all over the place. But the end brings it all together so perfectly and connects it all with such clarity. Amazing.

Chris says

Absolutely fantastic. One of the best books I have ever read. Secular Buddhism the way Batchelor explains it

is crystal clear and its implications are profound. If you are interested in buddhist philosophy without dogmas this is a great place to start.

Tim Hickey says

For the past couple of years I've been reading books about Secular Buddhism. I'll post reviews of some of those books soon. This one is the latest by Stephen Batchelor, a Buddhist who has trained in various traditional forms of Buddhism over the past 40 years, but after long reflection he rejected the metaphysical parts of Buddhist though (reincarnation, karma, etc.) and discovered that you can be an atheist and a Buddhist. This particular book lays out his view of a Buddhism for the modern age. Many people are calling this Secular Buddhism.

The book alternates Chapters about Secular Buddhism today with Chapters about some of the important figures in Buddha's life, people who were not "monks" but were "laypeople" and yet still followed the Buddhist dharma, engaging with life from a Buddhist perspective.

This form of Buddhism is immensely appealing to me because it is a way of living, rather than a religion and, to me, it is a truly scientific approach to spirituality. It describes some practices (mindfulness meditation) and some ideas that help one live a life without much of the unnecessary suffering that we often live through. You don't have to accept any of these ideas or practices on faith. If they work, then use them; if they don't then don't. This is a "religion" with no required beliefs and where there are no authorities; rather there are people with ideas that you can explore if you want...

The goal of Secular Buddhist practice, in my opinion, is to achieve Nirvana and to act effectively as a positive force in the world. Nirvana itself is characterized by living effectively in a complex world without the unnecessary suffering that many accept as a necessary part of life.

The ways to achieve Nirvana are pretty straightforward and involve learning how to discover that you have much less control over your life than we think. Once we accept that much of our inner life (thoughts, emotions) are not fully within our control, we can work on taking them less seriously and seeing live more clearly without the lens of ego distorting everything. Meditation allows one to have some space without these automatic thoughts (or with fewer of them and more distance from them).

This is very similar to the approach used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, where we learn to question our automatic thoughts and to explore the root causes of our painful emotions. In Secular Buddhism you can deal with painful emotions by recognizing them, labeling them, analyzing them, and then letting them go -- which to me means not spending any more time actively thinking about those issues.

I'm only a few Chapters in to the book, but I very much enjoy his attempt to make the historical parts of Buddhism relevant and informative in our modern age. I'll post more when I finish this book.

I just finished the book and found it very interesting. The author has a vision for a new renaissance of Buddhism and he makes a case that the secular version he proposes is much closer to what Gotama, the original Buddha, was teaching than any of today's Buddhist sects. He makes an excellent case for this argument by sharing with us a close reading of the oldest manuscripts in the Buddhist cannon, principally the

Pali documents, and looking closely at the meanings of the key words in Gotama's discourses. Another interesting approach he takes is to look closely at a few of the regular people (non-monks) that play a major role in Gotama's discourses as a way of understanding how he saw the dharma practiced in people who also fully engaged in life - from kings, to his personal assistant.

Ironically, all of this scholarship is designed to show that the historical Buddha would greatly disapprove of the current state of Buddhism, with its strict hierarchical ecclesiastic structure and dedication to "sacred" texts. The main message that connects with me is that what makes Buddhism work is the dharma, i.e. the actual practice, and that once we start along that path and enter the stream, we can, and indeed must, discover for ourselves how to live the dharma in a way that frees us from needless suffering and allows us to be more freely creative and effective in making the world a better place.

James says

There is something strange about a “Secular Buddhism” that is self-consciously modern, non-dogmatic, that purports to be a scientifically and critically informed Buddhism, and which harks back 2,500 years to the “true” words of the Master. Yet this is what Stephen Batchelor seems to do. Seeking to develop a modern approach to Buddhism by determining what the original Buddha said (and then interpreting what he really meant).

In general I like Stephen Batchelor’s work. He is thoughtful, engaging, clear, and he makes you think. He provides a lot of interesting information, especially if you are at all intrigued by ancient history, early Buddhism, and what has become known as the Pali cannon. And he seems like such a nice guy. Yet, there is something missing. I believe this is reflected in his discussions of dependent arising, and nibbana. There are also I believe some failures of logic in the approach put forward by Mr Batchelor. Rather than write a treatise which would probably be nearly as long as the book itself I will limit my comments to some brief(ish) bullet pointed reflections.

• Batchelor’s general aim is basically an attempt to develop a modern approach to Buddhism by determining what the historic Buddha really said, and even more tenuously, by interpreting what he really meant.

There is a very protestant flavour to Mr Batchelor’s work, and too much of the popular, or at least the most vocal “secular Buddhist” approach. It smacks of a fundamentalism that gives primacy to “the book”, or to sacred texts. In this case the Pali cannon; and the earliest texts in particular. There is a clear sense of the early Pali texts as the true legitimate source of knowledge. These texts are those that fit the view of the author, or alternatively they are interpreted in such a way as to fit the author’s views. Now this is a slightly harsh criticism as Batchelor generally makes a good case, nevertheless these are the facts. Certain comments from the texts are given primacy over others. The argument goes that there were latter additions to fit with the cultural and political demands of the past. This does not seem unreasonable, and it is possible that some texts were also supressed, or lost, however this is not mentioned.

• The fact that the Pali texts are not really the earliest texts seems to be ignored. Those are the Gandharan texts. The oldest Pali texts are from around the 1800’s, and are based on earlier copies, and an even earlier oral tradition. Of course the Gandharan tests have really only begun to be translated, but the scholarship is clear, they are far older. They also show that texts from various Buddhist schools were written on the same scrolls. The feeling among scholars is that this indicates that the breaking up into distinct schools with their own primary texts happened later than originally thought and that those schools then purged or gave less

precedence to texts that became associated with other traditions of Buddhism. That is, the Pali texts were edited, and probably edited out teachings that did not agree with their brand of Buddhist philosophy, or at least with that of the precursors to modern Theravada.

• Much is made of the fact that Gotama, the Buddha, was an human being, just like us. If that is so, then why is so much emphasis put on what he said, and on getting absolutely right what he meant, Isn't it possible that among those who have practiced in the various Buddhist traditions for the last two and a half thousand years someone might have come up with ideas and practices just as good, and maybe even better than Mr Gotama's?

• Batchelor's view of dependent arising and nibbana (nirvana) appears very cognitive, and psychological (in the popular sense). It is explanative in nature. What is missing is acknowledgment of the importance, even the primacy of the experiential nature of these components of Buddhism as non-cognitively mediated ways of experiencing our lives and our experience in various Buddhist schools of practice. For example this is central to the Son/Chan/Zen schools. It also seems consistent with the story of Buddha's awakening, and with statements in the Pail texts such as that quoted on Batchelor's page 309.

In addition, while Batchelor claims that a secular Buddhist approach places a form of realisation before the engagement with life through the eight fold path, and the four tasks (four truths) much of his writing appears to describe the opposite. That is he describes a secular Buddhism that entails what appears to be a bhavana or a cultivation approach. An approach he attributes to more traditional forms of Buddhism. In my experience such bhavana approaches tend to be supported by the Theravadan schools, and perhaps some Tibetan, but certainly not the main Chan/Zen approaches. That is, it is certainly not representative of traditional Buddhism, but does appear to be the approach of secular Buddhism.

• He seem to make a big thing about "religious" Buddhism and beliefs in the supernatural, reincarnation, the exclusion of women from "the clergy", and an antipathy among traditionalists towards those of certain sexual orientations - yet this does not really appear to be an issue in those forms of Buddhism which are primarily western. There are existent forms of Buddhism closely derived from Asian traditions, or even considering themselves traditional, that deal with these issues in a very liberal western manner. Some variants of the Sanbo Kyodan tradition springs to mind as examples.

Overall I believe that Mr Batchelor's arguments are most appropriately relevant to those western Buddhist converts who adopt the belief systems of Asian cultures as part of their Buddhist practice. This would be a minority of western Buddhists in my experience; that experience is naturally limited, so I could be wrong. However, the real difficulty with After Buddhism is that it could give an erroneous view of Buddhism and its varied practices for those interested in the subject. It's explanations of dependent arising and nibbana (nirvana) seem simplistic, and I believe misleading. Overall I fear the book might lead some readers to a superficial practice. An intellectualisation of Buddhist practices rather than to a practice which leads to a full embodiment of our experience, and of this wonderfully articulated method of experiencing this strange life we live.

Tom says

With his latest book, After Buddhism, renowned scholar Stephen Batchelor continues to expand his vision

for a “secular Buddhism”, a project he began nearly twenty years ago in his 1997 book Buddhism Without Beliefs. In that groundbreaking book, he sounded an urgent alarm about what he saw as the growing institutionalization of Buddhist thought and the consequences of such a rigid traditionalist approach. Now, in this new volume, he has put forth a less alarming, but still intensely urgent, call for Buddhists to “practice the dharma of the Buddha in the context of modernity.”

One might well expect that, in pursuing this modern context, Batchelor will be offering his readers updated versions of the traditional teachings, couched in more contemporary language. But no – surprisingly, he turns back instead to what he terms “the roots of the tradition”, seeking to uncover the original meanings of the Buddhist discourses. Such an approach, he contends, is needed because these discourses have in so many cases been obscured by twenty-five centuries’ worth of institutionalized dogma incorrectly imposed upon them by generations of teachers who have misunderstood the Buddha’s intentions, attaching a quality of metaphysical truth to the ethical teachings he offered.

Thus, the way forward to modernity is by way of going back to the past.

The most startling discovery to emerge from Batchelor’s examination of these roots of the tradition is his finding that the four “noble truths” (there is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is an end to suffering, and there is a path that leads to the end of suffering) are more properly understood – and, more correctly translated from the original Pali texts – as the following integrated set of four “tasks”:

1. Suffering is to be comprehended.
2. The arising is to be let go of.
3. The ceasing is to be beheld.
4. The path is to be cultivated.

What arises in the second task, and what is beheld to have ceased in the third, is “reactivity” – the term Batchelor uses in place of the more traditional “clinging”, and by which he means the complete spectrum of reflexive behaviors we thoughtlessly pursue in our futile quest to prolong pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones, all because we have not truly comprehended suffering (the first task).

Batchelor’s recasting of the second and third “truths” into these twin tasks of letting go of reactivity and beholding its ceasing lead him to a conclusion that may well be the most controversial he has ever put forward – that the traditional formulation of the third noble truth (there is an end to suffering) is in fact untenable. “What Buddhists trumpet as the ‘end of suffering’ cannot mean what it says. Not only does it make little sense, the discourses themselves clearly state that it means the end of reactivity. To let go of reactivity and behold its ceasing is certainly no easy task, but at least it is something to which we can aspire, whereas the end of suffering will remain a pipe dream for as long as we are pulsating, breathing, ingesting, digesting, defecating bodies.”

This is a radical assertion indeed. And for me, it’s a most welcome one. Until now, I have seen no way to reconcile the claim of this “noble truth” that there is an end to suffering with the obvious truth that there has never yet been, nor does it seem likely that there ever will be, so much as a brief respite, no less an “end”, to all the unspeakable suffering that nature and mankind inflict on a daily basis to such a large portion of humanity.

Having spelled out his vision of the “fourfold task” as the foundation for a modern secular Buddhism early on in the book, Batchelor then proceeds in the ensuing chapters to write with his characteristic eloquence on a broad spectrum of topics essential to dharma practice, while never losing sight of the core assertion that

underlies every paragraph of this thought-provoking book – his plea that we “think of the dharma as a task-based ethics rather than a truth-based metaphysics”.

Here is a small sampling of what he has to say: on the meaning of the Pali word ‘dukkha’, often translated as ‘suffering’ (“the tragic dimension of life, implicit in experience because the world is constantly shifting and changing”), on the point of dharma practice (“to pay attention to your experience, such that you become viscerally aware of its ephemeral, poignant, empty, and impersonal character”), on the concept of self (“a perspective on experience that remains constant while the feelings, perceptions, and inclinations that make up one’s experience arise and pass away”), on the Buddhist approach to ethical behavior (“in facing a moral dilemma, one does not ask ‘What is the right thing to do?’ but rather ‘What is the most wise and loving thing to do in this specific instance?’”), and on mindfulness (“an exploratory and potentially transformative relationship with the pulsing, sensitive, and conscious material of life itself”).

I did have one reservation with After Buddhism, having to do with the format Batchelor has adopted for its eleven chapters. The five even-numbered ones (chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10) are given over to biographical sketches of five different and relatively unknown individuals, all contemporaries of the Buddha, each of whose stories demonstrates a particular way in which an ordinary lay person in the Buddha’s time successfully designed his life to be in harmony with the dharma – historical examples of a “secular Buddhism”, if you will. Batchelor states that his intention for inserting these tales into the scheme of his book is to show the reader that dharma practice has always been rooted in the events of ordinary life, and was never intended by the Buddha for the exclusive practice of monks, scholars, and teachers.

While each of the five persons so profiled is of interest, and while Batchelor’s talents as a storyteller equal his skills as a dharma teacher, the overall effect these alternating chapters had on me was akin to the experience of an intermission between acts at the theater – a welcome pause to stand up and stretch, perhaps, but then after the fifteen minute pause, enough. Let’s have the lights dim once more and turn our attention back to the drama on the stage – which, in the case of reading this book, meant getting back to the subsequent odd-numbered chapter where the real drama of the narrative would unfailingly resume.

This is admittedly a minor complaint on my part, and one with which not every other reader may concur.

Batchelor concludes his book with an inspiring chapter entitled “A Culture of Awakening”, in which he paints a hopeful picture of how a secular Buddhism might invigorate modern culture by infusing it with “a sense of the sublimity and interconnectedness of life”. Secular Buddhists, he says, have the opportunity to respond to the myriad challenges facing the planet “unconditioned by the instincts of reactive egotistic greed” that characterizes so much of modern human behavior. How? By practicing the fourfold task, thereby recovering “what the dharma has always been about: embracing the suffering of the world, letting go of reactivity, and experiencing that still, clear center from which we respond to the world in ways no longer determined by self-interest alone”.

Batchelor’s look back to the roots of the dharma tradition, the surprising point of departure for After Buddhism, ends with a look forward, to what he hopes will come “after Buddhism” – a more awakened secular culture, one that brings to fruition the seeds that the Buddha planted with his teachings all those centuries ago.

William Dury says

Like Mr. Wright (see “Why Buddhism is True”), Mr. Batchelor has trouble with “no self.” (Successful people have trouble giving up the ego. Imagine that.) Please see page 196 for Mr. Batchelor’s take on the issue. What I think is most important in his argument is his assertion that an ego or self is necessary if people are to act morally. “Taking such a stance means that Buddhists have to explain how such a non-existent self can function as a moral agent, capable of making responsible choices with consequences that will determine a person’s fate,” p. 196.

“A person’s fate” is an interesting concept for a secular Buddhist to use. Does he mean reincarnation? Standing before the Throne of God? (Oh, wait, no, that’s the non-secular Christians.) Anyway, more interesting is the argument he seems to be putting forward, that people cannot act morally, that we cannot treat one another decently, without celestial reward or punishment. Dear Mr. Batchelor: We act morally because that is what makes us happy. The Stoics had a grasp on this. If you do your duty, if you do what you are supposed to do, you will be happy. I think the Stoic idea of the Daemon in Marcus Aurelius addresses this. You know what is right. Do that and you will be happy. Let Heaven take care of itself.

I don’t mean to give this splendid book short shift. I will write more later.

Peter Landau says

Buddha died after a bout of bloody diarrhea, but Buddhists don’t wear red stool around their necks. Otherwise, the religion that developed after the Buddha’s death shares many qualities with Christianity: conservative, staid and dogmatic. In his new book, AFTER BUDDHISM: RETHINKING THE DHARMA FOR A SECULAR AGE, Stephen Batchelor tries to free the Buddha from the cycle of repetitive traditions that neuter his teachings.

Much like recent books on the historical Jesus, which exposes a radical Jew who was only later made a deity, Batchelor interprets Buddha for a modern age (secular having Latin roots meaning occurring in a certain age) by going back to the source text of his discourses to find the seed of the real man and demystify the iconic image that populates temples and T-shirts. In doing so he finds a pragmatist, not someone interested in metaphysics, who embraces doubt and offers a way to live life.

Through a thorough explanation of Dharma and the precepts and practice of Buddhism as taught by the Buddha, to historical sketches of some of the Buddha’s inner-circle, specifically those who didn’t chose a monastic lifestyle but engaged with life and their communities, Batchelor paves a path through the dogma. As Buddhism traveled from India to China and Japan it adapted to these new cultures and broadening its view. The same thing is happening now as Buddhism embeds itself in the west. While all the talk of arising and passing can sometimes read like a tidal chart, Batchelor has lit a bright light for readers to follow in his spiritual wake and discover a way of living that is not fanatical or exploitive.

Roger Morris says

The author managed to make a potentially intriguing thesis into a tedious exercise in retelling legendary narratives of Buddhism. I fail to see how spending entire chapters recounting the biographies of various

Buddhist saints aimed to achieve his thesis of promoting a secular Buddhism for the 21st Century, devoid of ancient superstitions. Robert Wright has managed to achieve this in his recent book "Why Buddhism is True", and maintain a much more entertaining read in the process.

Carol says

One of the better books on Buddhism that I've read and almost as useful and thought-provoking as Nichtern's ROAD HOME. Once again, as ever, "cultivating an awareness of feelings is crucial because many habitual reactive patterns are triggered as much by these subjective bodily affects as by the objects or persons we believe to be responsible for them". Ah those habitual reactive patterns, born of unmindful feeling states and unskillful thinking! Excellent analysis from a secularist viewpoint, complete with a closer reading the texts, embedded in history as they are. I learned a lot. Always a good thing.
