

Iain Brown - Sunday 17th Feb 2013

## A Twenty First Century Buddhist Skeptic – Part One

Now that we are a global village and so we are increasingly united and dominated by consumerism and casino capitalism and now that we share each other's drugs, drinks and other vicious habits around the globe, we also increasingly share a knowledge of each other's religious heritages.

All over the world in cultures such our Christian one, in Buddhist ones and even in Islamic ones, a few people have been, and still are, struggling to slough off the stultifying and repressive beliefs of the past, to preserve the best of each of their practices and values, perhaps even the best of their beliefs and institutions. They are trying to build a new open version of their religious and cultural tradition to make sense in the changing conditions of the relatively recent past and especially of the present. That is what we, here, are all trying to do too and it is worth some time and energy to take a look at what some of these bold explorers in other cultures and other religious traditions are finding.

As Unitarians, who often led the way, well, at least in the past, we should welcome these people, like Tariq Ramadan and Stephen Batchelor, about whom I am going to speak today, and many others, who are refining and developing their cultures into what may, someday, become a common culture shared around the world of, not just atheism but, more importantly, a new common framework for sharing in the terror, the beauty, the wonder, the awe and the reverence of our mysterious existence here together – which, in my view, is what religion or spirituality, call it what you please, is really about – *the terror, the beauty, the wonder, the awe and the reverence of our mysterious existence here together.*

In Stephen Batchelor's autobiography "Confession of a Buddhist Atheist" he writes "MARCH 10, 1973. I remember the date because it marked the fourteenth anniversary of the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa in 1959, which triggered the flight of the Dalai Lama into the exile from which he has yet to return. I was studying Buddhism in Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital in exile, a former British hill-station in the Himalayas. "A white canvas awning, straining and flapping in the wind, was strung in front of the Library. Beneath it sat a huddle of senior monks in burgundy robes, aristocrats in long gray chubas, and the Indian superintendent of police from Kotwali Bazaar. I joined a crowd gathered on a large terrace below and waited for the proceedings to begin. The Dalai Lama, a spry, shaven-headed man of thirty-eight, strode onto an impromptu stage. The audience spontaneously prostrated itself, as one, onto the muddy ground. He read a speech, which was barely audible above the wind, delivered in rapid-fire Tibetan, a language I did not yet understand, at a velocity I would never master. Every now and then a drop of rain would descend from the lowering sky."

"Then there was an almighty crash. Rain hammered down on the corrugated iron roofs of the residential buildings on the far side of the Library, obliterating the Dalai Lama's words. This noise went on for several minutes. The lama (up) on the hillside (managing the weather) stamped his feet, blew his thighbone (trumpet), and rang his bell. The heavy drops of rain that had started falling on the dignitaries and the crowd abruptly stopped.

After the Dalai Lama left and the crowd dispersed, I joined a small group of fellow Injis (people awaiting acceptance as novices in a monastery). In reverential tones, we discussed how the lama on the hill—whose name was Yeshe Dorje—had prevented the storm from soaking us. I heard myself say: "And you could hear the rain still falling all around us: over there by the Library and on those government buildings behind as well." The others nodded and smiled in awed agreement.

Even as I was speaking, I knew I was not telling the truth. I had heard no rain on the roofs behind me. Not a drop. Yet to be convinced that the lama had prevented the rain with his ritual and spells, I had to believe that he had created a magical umbrella to shield the crowd from the storm. Otherwise, what had happened would not have been that remarkable. Who has not witnessed rain falling a short distance away from where one is standing on dry ground? Perhaps it was nothing more than a brief mountain shower on the nearby hillside. None of us would have dared to admit this possibility. That would have brought us perilously close to questioning the lama's prowess and, by implication, the whole elaborate belief system of Tibetan Buddhism.

For several years, I continued to peddle this lie. It was my favorite (and only) example of my firsthand experience of the supernatural powers of Tibetan lamas. But, strangely, whenever I told it, it didn't feel like a lie. I had taken the lay Buddhist precepts and would soon take monastic vows. I took the moral injunction against lying very seriously. In other circumstances, I would scrupulously, even neurotically, avoid telling the slightest falsehood. Yet, somehow, this one did not count. At times, I tried to persuade myself that perhaps it was true: the rain had fallen behind me, but I had not noticed. The others—albeit at my prompting—had confirmed what I said. But such logical gymnastics failed to convince me for very long.

I suspect my lie did not feel like a lie because it served to affirm what I believed to be a greater truth. My words were a heartfelt and spontaneous utterance of our passionately shared convictions. In a weirdly unnerving way, I did not feel that "I" had said them. It was as though something far larger than all of us had caused them to issue from my lips. Moreover, the greater truth, in whose service my lie was employed, was imparted to us by men of unimpeachable moral and intellectual character. These kind, learned, enlightened monks would not deceive us. They repeatedly said to accept what they taught only after testing it as carefully as a goldsmith would assay a piece of gold. Since they themselves must have subjected these teachings to that kind of rigorous scrutiny during their years of study and meditation, then surely they were not speaking out of blind conviction, but from their own direct knowledge and experience? Ergo: Yeshe Dorje stopped the rain with his thighbone, bell, mustard seeds, and incantations.

Tibetan lamas held a view of the world that was deeply at odds with the one in which I had been raised. Educated in the monasteries of old Tibet, they were ignorant of the findings of the natural sciences. They knew nothing of the modern disciplines of cosmology, physics, or biology. Nor did they have any knowledge of the literary, philosophical, and religious traditions that flourished outside their homeland. For them, all that human beings needed to know had been worked out centuries before by the Buddha and his followers and was preserved in the Kangyur and Tengyur (the Tibetan Buddhist canon). There you would learn that the earth was a triangular continent in a vast ocean dominated by the mighty Mount Sumeru, around which the sun, moon and planets revolved. Driven by the force of good and bad deeds committed over beginningless former lifetimes, beings were repeatedly reborn as gods, titans, humans, animals, ghosts, and denizens of hell until they had the good fortune to encounter and put into practice the Buddha's teaching, which would enable them to escape the cycle of rebirth forever. Moreover, as followers of the Mahayana (Great Vehicle), Tibetan Buddhists vowed to keep taking birth out of compassion for all sentient beings until every last one of them was freed. Of the world's religions, they believed that Buddhism alone was capable of bringing suffering to an end. And of the various kinds of Buddhism, the most effective, rapid, and complete of them all was the form of the religion as preserved in Tibet.

I believed all this. Or, more accurately: I wanted to believe all this. Never before had I encountered a truth I was willing to lie for. Yet, as I see it now, my lie did not spring from conviction but from a lack of conviction. It was prompted by my craving to believe. Unlike some of my contemporaries, whom I envied, I would never achieve unwavering faith in the traditional Buddhist view of the world. Nor would I ever succeed in replacing my own judgments with

uncritical surrender to the authority of a "root" lama, which was indispensable for the practice of the highest tantras, the only way, so it was claimed, to achieve complete enlightenment in this lifetime. No matter how hard I tried to ignore it or rationalize it away, my insincerity kept nagging at me in a dark, closed recess of my mind. By the lights of my Tibetan teachers, I was a Buddhist failure."

As the great exodus of the nineteen sixties from Christian churches in the UK rolled on and more and more people could no longer sustain belief and practice in orthodox Christian religion many, even of my fellow students, elected to call themselves Buddhists. For a while it almost became quite fashionable and in the University of Edinburgh where they still run courses in Buddhism they still have a problem with young people who are attracted to it and then do not carry through the rigorous studies required. I was saved from that because, at that time in the sixties, I read Christmas Humphreys' then leading book on 'Buddhism' and was singularly unimpressed.

I probably do not need to remind you that Buddhism is the generic name for as vast and varied a set of beliefs, practices and institutions as Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. So it does not make sense to try to appreciate Buddhism as a whole, although I, personally think that, as a whole, it does have some identifiable and distinctive general characteristics, one or two of which will be surveyed today.

Nor is there much to be gained, I guess, in delving deeply into any one single school. That is why I have chosen to try to understand one individual's particular Buddhism.

Throughout all that is said today I know I can trust our individualistic and critically appreciative band of spiritual travellers to understand that I am no authority in this area and that I shall be trying to give you room to come to your own conclusions.

So today I am introducing you to a bold twenty first century Western thinker and writer who has a similar relationship to Buddhism as many of us Unitarians have to Christianity.

In the early nineteen seventies Stephen Batchelor, a Londoner in his late teens, drifted East through Turkey and Afghanistan, on the hippy trail, smoking much Cannabis and taking many trips on LSD as he went. After a severe health warning and a near death experience in the mountains of the Hindu Kush which shook him up, in 1972 he reached Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama was leading his small band of Tibetan refugees. Probably in a susceptible state as a result of his recent experiences of mortality for a nineteen year old, he found the Dalai Lama an unexpectedly attractive character and within days he had signed up to a course in a particular kind of Tibetan Buddhism led by Geshe Dhargyey, the Dalai Lama's philosophical adviser and appointed debating partner. Within a year he was ordained as a monk in the Tibetan Mahayana tradition.

Stephen Batchelor is such a beautifully lucid writer that, although I am here, often summarising and describing his thoughts, I will often quote directly from him, and at length, because no one can put across better than he can with the vividness of autobiography the ideas and the vivid detail of the experiences of some of his life.

In his book, "Confession of a Buddhist Atheist" he wrote "Much of what animated me in those days I now recognize as the romantic yearnings of an idealistic, alienated, and aimless young man. I endowed these strange, exotic people, about whom I knew little, with all the virtues that my own culture seemed to lack. Having been raised by a single mother, I suspect I was also searching for an absent father. Yet at the core of my muddled quest lay a quiet certainty that I had stumbled across something authentic and true, which I could neither doubt nor adequately name. For the first time in my life, I had encountered a path: a purposive trajectory that led from bewilderment and anguish to something called "enlightenment." Although I had only the

dimmiest idea of what "enlightenment" might mean, I embraced the path toward it."

Stephen Batchelor gave up the monk's robe and released himself from his vows back in 1985 but he is no disappointed and discontented, critic of his rejected religion. He describes in glowing terms what it did for him to begin with. But equally he describes his inevitable moves beyond it and then out of it.

Stephen Batchelor was blessed or, some might say, cursed with a restless and enquiring mind. Even as he pursued his studies with delight and was empowered by the highest in the hierarchy of spiritual superiors within Tibetan Buddhism to become a Tantric God, he continued, most dangerously, to think for himself.

He was offered and accepted the gift to him of a fast-track path to enlightenment through the Vajrayana ritual empowerments delivered by those at the very top of the Tibetan Buddhist aristocracy but this brought with it a vow to solemnly recite every morning for the rest of his life, the text that described the generation of himself into a Tantric God.

He writes and I quote: "I solemnly undertook to recite daily for the rest of my life the rest of my life the text that described the generation of myself into this tantric god. Henceforth, every morning I would become the glorious and mighty bull-headed Yamantaka: 'with a dark azure body, nine faces, thirty-four arms, and sixteen legs, of which the right are drawn in and the left extended. My tongue curls upward, my fangs are bared, my face is wrinkled with anger, my orange hair bristles upward. I devour human blood, fat, marrow, and lymph. My head is crowned with five frightful dried skulls and I am adorned with a garland of fifty moist human heads. I wear a black snake as a brahmin's thread. I am naked, my belly is huge and my penis erect. My eyebrows, eyelashes, beard, and body hair blaze like the fire at the end of time'.

Over the following months, I received further empowerments from Serkong Rinpoche, Trijang Rinpoche—the Dalai Lama's junior tutor—and from the Dalai Lama himself. I soon had to spend at least an hour every day reciting ritual texts in order to honor the commitments I had taken."

He was at the pinnacle of the Tibetan religious aristocracy. Then came the turning point, the beginning of a long slow exit process. An oft-cited passage attributed to the Buddha says "Just as a goldsmith assays gold by rubbing, cutting and burning, so should you examine my words. Do not accept them out of faith in me." Attracted by this promise to find a sound intellectual basis for his new enthusiasm and beliefs, Stephen Batchelor went for further training with the most intellectual school in Tibetan Buddhism, the Geluk school, the Dalai Lama's own. The problem was that the very Stephen Batchelor, who had failed his A-levels before he went wandering, turned out to be too good a philosopher.

His basic problem was with the question "What is transferred from one living being to another at rebirth?" the same basic problem as I had, but he puts it differently, more as a philosopher than a psychologist. As he puts it, Buddhist orthodox teaching declares that the mind that is allegedly transferred at rebirth is immaterial, therefore it cannot, in principle, be produced by something material such as a brain. Early Buddhists had no knowledge of the brain as the probable basis of mind, which we, in the west generally assume it to be. Buddhists teach that mind is immaterial and is only capable of being produced by a previous immaterial mind. They claim they are certain of this because, they maintain, in advanced states of meditation they come to know it directly through their first-hand experience. As Batchelor writes "Thus the 'proof' of rebirth rests on a subjective experience of non-physical entity in a non-ordinary state of awareness. If you lack such an experience yourself, you have to trust the word of meditators more accomplished than oneself."

Some years ago, when my daughter went to study in a Buddhist monastery, I spent a whole fortnight in a hotel in Katmandhu, reading the central textbook for the Honours course in Buddhism in the University of Edinburgh where she had studied it. My conclusion on rebirth was very similar to Stephen Batchelor's. "What is transferred?" Most schools in Buddhism

have a very fragmented psychology of the self and it seems that different schools have different views of which fragments of the self are transferred from one body to another at rebirth. I was wholly unconvinced.

I will continue now by quoting Stephen Batchelor. He argues; "But if the proof of rebirth finally depends on having faith in the reports made by others of their subjective experiences, then how is it any different from claiming that God exists because mystics—why would they lie?—claim to have had direct experience of God? On what grounds should I choose to believe a Buddhist meditator rather than a Christian mystic or, for that matter, someone who claims to have been abducted by aliens and taken to a spaceship docked behind Alpha Centauri? All may be equally moral, sincere, and honest people, passionately convinced in the truth of what they have experienced, but their claims are going to persuade only those who are already predisposed to believe them.

Why does all this matter so much? Why did it cause me so many sleepless nights? It matters because the entire edifice of traditional Buddhist thought stands or falls on the belief in rebirth. If there was no rebirth, then why would one expend any effort in trying to liberate oneself from the cycle of birth and death and attain nirvana, the final aim of Buddhism? If there was no rebirth, then how would moral acts that do not ripen before one's death ever bear their fruits?"

"Yet for rebirth to be possible, something must survive the death of the body and brain. To survive physical death, this "something" must not only be non-physical but also capable of storing the "seeds" of previously committed moral acts (karma) that will "ripen" in future lifetimes. Since Buddhists reject the existence of a permanent self that persists from life to life, they posit an impermanent, non-physical mental process to account for what is reborn. This unavoidably leads to a body-mind dualism. The "clear and knowing mind" that inhabits a material body seems no different from Descartes's *res cogitans* (a knowing entity) that inhabits a *res extensa* (an extended entity, i.e., a body).

How can such an immaterial mind ever connect with a material body? Being immaterial, it cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. If it is untouchable, how can it "touch" or have any contact with a brain? How does it connect to a neuron or a neuron connect to it? I rebelled against the very idea of body-mind dualism. I could not accept that my experience was ontologically divided into two incommensurable spheres: one material, the other mental. Rationally, I found the idea incoherent. Yet this is what I was being asked (told) to believe. I could not accept that, in order to be a Buddhist, I had to take on trust a truth-claim about the nature of the empirical world, and, having adopted such a belief, that I had to hold on to it regardless of whatever further evidence came to light about the relation of the brain to the mind. Belief in the existence of a non-physical mental agent, I realized, was a Buddhist equivalent of belief in a transcendent God."

"As soon as you split the world in two parts—one physical and one spiritual—you will most likely privilege mind over matter. Since mind—even an impermanent Buddhist mind—survives bodily death and is the agent of moral choice, then it is not only more enduring and "real" than mere matter but also the arbiter of one's destiny. The more you valorize mind and spirit, the more you will be prone to denigrate matter. Before long, mind starts to become Mind with a capital M, while matter becomes the illusory sludge of the world. The next thing you know, Mind starts to play the role of God: it becomes the ground and origin of all things, the cosmic intelligence that animates all forms of life.

(Our teachers) told us to subject the texts we studied to rational scrutiny and critique, but (they) also insisted that the authors of those texts were fully enlightened beings. It dawned on me that we were not expected to use logic and debate to establish whether or not the doctrine of rebirth was true. We were only using them to prove, as best we could, what the founders of the tradition had already established to be true. If the arguments failed to convince us, that did not really matter. For in the end, reason was subordinate to faith, Geshe encouraged us to keep inquiring into these matters, but as long as we did not arrive at the same conclusion as the tradition, then clearly we had not inquired enough. "Do not accept [my words] just out of faith

in me," said the Buddha, but in reality we were expected to do just that. I realized then that to pursue my vocation as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, belief in rebirth was not optional but obligatory."

Later, after several sleepless nights Stephen Batchelor decided that he had no interest at all in future lifetimes or in liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The best thing about Buddhism was how it had taught him, through its practices of meditation and others, to be more fully alive and responsive to this life and this world. I would add that the worst thing about the doctrines of rebirth and karma are the ways in which throughout the institutions of the religion these beliefs are used as a means of social control in parallel to the doctrines of heaven and hell in the Christian tradition and Islamic traditions.

As Stephen Batchelor writes, "to arrive at conclusions which contradicted orthodoxy was not only anathema but IMMORAL. To believe that there is no rebirth and no moral law of causation is an evil mental act that will lead to confusion and anguish in this life and hellfire in the world to come. And you did not need to say or do anything to commit it. All I had to do was to hold an incorrect opinion in the privacy of my own mind. Such 'wrong view' is a thought crime, listed in the classical texts alongside murder, robbery and rape. Indeed it is often said to be the heaviest of all evil actions since it established a viewpoint from which every other misdeed stems."

Of course Stephen Batchelor was well aware that he could not pursue his vocation as a monk or teach without hypocrisy if he did not believe in these central doctrines of the tradition, so he compromised or prevaricated for a while and decided to secretly call himself an agnostic.

But the damage had been done. In the Mahayana tradition of Tibet his duty was to find enlightenment or awakening himself and so qualify to escape the endless round of rebirth and suffering but to altruistically pass up the opportunity and stay on as a Bhodhisattva until every soul still caught in the wheel of karma was rescued. He was in painful turmoil at the loss of what had been a hopeful and calming faith that had given his life purpose. Later he came to see belief in rebirth from an existentialist perspective as above all an attempt to deny death and as a denial of the perspective that that powerful reality put on the intensity of daily life.

Soon he accepted a posting to a Buddhist center in Switzerland. There he worked on translations and, with his command of English, French and Tibetan he produced several important ones. But his intellectual and spiritual journey began to take him away, first into analysis with a Jungian analyst, and then into European existentialism, especially into Husserl and Heidegger.

He writes "Heidegger had entirely abandoned any dualistic assumption of a separation between mind and matter. In 'Being and Time', he speaks of the primary human experience as one of "being-in-the-world." This is the foundation upon which all distinctions such as "subject" and "object," "mind" and "matter" are subsequently imposed. Because we have become so familiar with such distinctions, we assume them to inhere within the structure of being itself. Yet, for Heidegger, our condition is fundamentally not divided along these or any such lines at all.

This resonated with my own experience of practicing mindfulness. I had noticed that when listening to the song of a bird, it was impossible to differentiate between the cooing of the wood pigeon, on the one hand, and my hearing of it, on the other. Conceptually, the two were clearly different, but, in immediate experience, I could not have one without the other, I could not draw a line between them, I could not say where the birdsong stopped and my hearing of it began. There was just a single, primary, undifferentiated me-hearing-the-birdsong. The same was true for me-sitting-cross-legged-on-a-cushion: I could not tell where my bottom ended and the cushion began. They weirdly blurred into one another. (Sit still for a few minutes, close your eyes, and check for yourself.) Such experiences made it all the more difficult for me to accept that mind and matter were two separate things. The idea that mind existed independently of matter as a kind of formless, ghostly "knowing" made no sense.

Being-in-the-world means that I am inextricably knit into the fabric of this fluid, indivisible, and contingent reality I share with others. There is no room for a disembodied mind or soul, however subtle, to float free from this condition, to contemplate it from a hypothetical Archimedean point outside. Without such a mind or soul, it is hard to conceive of anything that will go on into another life once this one comes to an end. My actions, like the words of dead philosophers, may continue to reverberate and bear fruits long after my death, but I will not be around to witness them.”

“Heidegger describes how being-in-the-world is permeated by the "mood" of anxiety that prompts one to "flee" and attach oneself to particular things in the world in a desperate attempt to find something stable and secure to hold on to. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world is constantly slipping away. He recounts in detail how one's life is invariably a being-toward-death. Death is not an event among other events, something that will just happen one day like anything else, but an ever-present possibility that quivers inside us each moment. Such ideas confirmed what Buddhism taught, but in a language that spoke to me more vividly. Heidegger probed relentlessly into the uncanniness of simply being here at all, without ever appealing to the familiar but misleading dichotomies of reality and appearance, subject and object, mind and matter. His language was often obscure and cumbersome, but that seemed entirely appropriate given the radical nature of what he was trying to do. Heidegger believed that the entire project of Western thought that began with Plato had come to an end. It was necessary to start all over again, to embark on a new way of thinking, which he called *besinnliches Denken*: contemplative thinking.”

“The works of Heidegger and other Western thinkers soon engaged my interest more than the Buddhist texts we were studying in the monastery. (My current teacher) did not discourage me in these interests, but it was difficult to discuss them with him in any depth. As I gained greater fluency in Tibetan, I became aware of the language's limitations. It was ideal for studying classical Indian Buddhism (the task for which the written form of Tibetan had been invented), but lacked the vocabulary, context, and range to talk about existential alienation or the significance of Kafka and Beckett.”

Now days Batchelor has read many more western existential philosophers such as Sartre and Husserl and existentialist theologians such Paul Tillich and John Mcquarrie and calls himself a post-Christian Buddhist existentialist and declares he feels closest to Don Cupitt of the non-realists.

About this time in his life, Stephen Batchelor set off on a quest to find the real person, the historical Gotama, the Buddha, in a fascinating parallel with so many of us who, once our critical faculties have been roused, have pursued a quest for the historic person of Jesus. His findings are in his books and there is no time to review them here.

He also came to see the institutions, and particularly the monasticism, of Tibetan Buddhism, as I have long seen them, as a seriously elitist and feudal organization of society. Again, I quote, “Wherever I looked, in India, China, Southeast Asia, or Tibet, it was always the serene, world-renouncing, contemplative monk who represented the ideal of a Buddhist life. Laypeople tended to be seen as second-rate Buddhists, whose duties in the world prevented them from pursuing a high-octane spiritual career. And those exceptional lay figures who did achieve prominence in their traditions are presented as having done so in spite of their lay status.

The unstated presumption is this: what really matters is inner spiritual experience, which, by definition, consists of irreducibly private states of mind. Today, Buddhist meditation practices are widely promoted as techniques, which, if correctly applied, will lead one to greater inner happiness, peace, and contentment. No matter what is going on in the world around him, the good Buddhist is depicted as an unflappable beacon of smiling calm, ready to respond at any moment with a kind gesture or some choice words of wisdom. As a way of coping with the hectic pace and stress of modern life, the housewife or business executive alike is encouraged to become a monk in lay clothing.

But as a culture and civilization, Buddhism consists of far more than inner experiences. It is known through buildings, gardens, sculptures, paintings, calligraphy, poetry, and craftwork. It is present in each mark made by artists and artisans on rocks, clay votive tablets, fragile palm leaves, primed canvases, hand-pressed paper, wooden printing blocks, raked gravel, and paper lanterns. On my visits to monasteries in Tibet, the polished furrows in the rock, worn into the mountain by centuries of passing feet, moved me far more than the shrines to which they led. Who were the men and women who made them? Who were the people who constructed the intricately carved stone gateways at Sanchi, chipped out the black basalt temples at Ajanta, erected the giant stupa at Borobodur, built the Kumbum at Gyantse, designed the soaring cathedrals at Pagan, laid out the rock gardens at Ryoanji, or sculpted the standing Buddhas at Bamiyan? We don't know.

These forgotten people are my fellows. They are the silent ones on whose behalf I want to speak. I know nothing of their religious beliefs or spiritual attainments. Their understanding of the subtleties of Buddhist doctrine is irrelevant. They left behind visible and tangible objects created by their own hands: dumb things that speak to me across the centuries in a language that no text can reproduce. Irrespective of what Buddhist icon a painted scroll may depict, it embodies the intelligence and imagination, the passion and care of its creator. I feel an affinity with the makers of these things. A Zen garden can say as much about what the Buddha taught as the most erudite treatise on emptiness.”

Finally he broke with his immediate comrades and decided to follow an intriguing visitor to Switzerland from a wholly different school of Buddhism in Korea. In a monastery in Korea he studied Theravada Buddhism and Zen but he never took them so seriously on board and made them his own to the extent that he had done with the Tibetan Mahayana schools in those first glorious years. He teamed up with a French Buddhist nun called Songil who could translate from Korean and together they produced English translations of some of their Korean teachers. Their working relationship changed into friendship and then into a sexual one and they decided together to cast off their robes, reverse their vows, resume their original names and marry in a civil ceremony in Hong Kong. But it seems significant to me that the first thing they did together as lay people once again was to visit the Buddhist temples of communist China and then Lhasa, the former capital of Tibet. Stephen wrote a best-selling guide to Lhasa which sustained them financially later.

When they returned to England they joined a Buddhist community in Devon where they were so poor that Martine was employed as a cleaner and Stephen earned a meager living as a translator and, later, as a leader of workshops. Stephen eventually became the director of the community, wrote for top Buddhist journals here and in the USA and became well known on TV and radio as an authority on Buddhism. Martine has produced a beautiful book on meditation and Stephen has written some best sellers, notably “Buddhism Without Beliefs; A Contemporary Guide to Awakening” (1997), “Alone with Others; An Existential Approach to Buddhism” (1983) “Living with the Devil; A Meditation on Good and Evil” (2004); and his best book, “Confession of a Buddhist Atheist” (2010). Eventually they retired to live in France in one of Martine’s family homes where they are pleased to be not even known locally as the Buddhists.

Stephen Batchelor’s Buddhism is still strong and he has devoted the rest of this life to it. But it is transformed. He writes, “Buddhism has become for me a philosophy of action and responsibility. It provides a framework of values, ideas and practices that nurture my ability to create a path in life, to define myself as a person, to act, to take risks, to imagine things differently, to make art. The more I prize Gotama’s teachings free from the matrix of Indian religious thought in which they are entrenched and the more I come to understand how his life unfolded in the context of his own times, the more I discern a template for living that I can apply at this time in this increasingly secular and globalized world.”



To be fair to Stephen Batchelor much more needs to be said about his and Martine's teachings on meditation; about his particular understanding of enlightenment, or awakening, as he prefers to call it; about his take on the Buddhist view of the self and its relation to western psychology; about his involvement with the ongoing development of Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapy. All that must wait.

I am never tired of reminding you of Hans Kung's famous saying that 'until there is peace between the religions, there will never be peace in this world.' The work of people like Batchelor and Ramadan is a crucial work for world peace, if that were ever to be possible. Sadly Unitarians no longer lead in this area and the lead is often from the breakaway Anglicans like Bishop Spong, Don Cupitt and Richard Holloway.

I have been presenting Stephen Batchelor to you as someone who has rejected key parts of his original faith tradition but yet found how to clarify and identify a core of it which is still of immense value to him and a practice of meditation which sustains him in everyday life. I invite you to compare your relationship with the Christian tradition, from which we all come, with Stephen Batchelor's relationship with the Buddhist tradition from which he comes. My day to day thinking has little to do with the Christianity I come from. My values do not need personification in a person of Jesus Christ. Because they are abstract they are infinitely applicable and can be seen at work in a wide variety of situations. Is your day to day life informed, influenced and enhanced by the Christianity you come from to any extent that might match how Stephen Batchelor's Buddhism seems to live on in him?

Let me repeat some of my opening words: Now that we are a global village let us join with all the thinkers struggling to refine and develop their cultures into what may someday become a common culture shared around the world of, not just atheism but, more importantly, a new common framework for sharing in the terror, the beauty, the wonder, awe and the reverence of our mysterious existence here together.