

Only some of you will have heard the outline biography of Stephen Batchelor, so I will give a brief outline of it here.

Stephen Batchelor, author of "Confession of a Buddhist Skeptic", left London, having flopped his A-levels in his late teens, made his wandering way across Europe and Asia Minor following the hippie trail in a haze of cannabis and LSD. He stopped in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama and his band of refugees. He soon absorbed all that the highest teachers in the Tibetan tradition could give him, offered himself as a monk, and was inducted into all the rarest secrets of Vajrayana and empowered with all the most potent of magical powers, to the extent that he became a Tibetan God and, for some years, had to spend four hours of every day reciting all the promises and vows he had taken.

At first he was captivated with his religion. He felt he had encountered something authentic and that now he had a purpose, to find 'enlightenment' whatever that was. But Stephen was blessed, or some might say cursed, with a restless and enquiring mind. The same Stephen Batchelor who had failed all his A-levels turned out to be too good a philosopher. His basic problem with the doctrine of reincarnation was with the question "What is transferred from one living being to another at rebirth?" He could not accept any dualism of the kind that distinguished a non-physical mind from a physical body. According to his view of the wholeness of body and mind there could be no transfer of mind, at rebirth, far less any history of moral or spiritual attainment or ignominy carried over into another life.

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. 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 has 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.

Sometime later he moved out of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism altogether to a Korean monastery where he learned and practiced the Theravada Buddhist tradition of South East Asia and the Zen Buddhist tradition of China and Japan.

As he translated important texts from these traditions he worked with a French Buddhist nun. 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.

They returned to England and joined a Buddhist community in Devon where Stephen eventually became the director and wrote for top Buddhist journals here and in the USA and became well known on TV and radio as an authority on Buddhism. Eventually they retired to live in France in one of Martine's family homes.

I am going to try to do two things this morning and that may be dangerous to do because we so easily confuse them. I am going to review what Stephen Batchelor still finds of value in the Buddhism he left as a monk, has declared himself an unbeliever about but yet still teaches, practices and writes about. I am also going to draw your attention to Batchelor's one-man scholarly effort to find the real man, the historic Buddha himself.

So let us begin with when Stephen Batchelor became a Buddhist skeptic and cast off his monk's robes. What has endured of Stephen Batchelor's Buddhism?

First and foremost is his enduring appreciation of the practice of meditation. He writes that 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. Some people make quite a fuss about the practice of meditation, as if it had to be taught by a specialist, usually through concentration on one's own breathing, and many teachers of meditation make quite a lot of money out of "teaching" it. If you listened to our reading from Chogyam Trampa, you will have grasped that, in principle, the practice is disarmingly simple. However when you come to practice it, you may, maybe not always, but often, find that it requires you to meet and face up to every demon within you. All your worst fears, all your most shameful and guilty experiences, all your own deficiencies and inadequacies, all

come up sooner or later and have to be calmly acknowledged at the very least or even transformed, as far as you are able, into something at least neutral, if not positive. When I spent a few months as a voluntary patient in a mental hospital at aged seventeen I began that process. I systematically wrote out my spontaneous thoughts as they occurred in my stream of consciousness. As each of my demons arose, I faced them down, examined them and eventually filled nine notebooks of them until, within a year or two, I could let my mind run free. I knew nothing of Buddhism then but I did come across a book by an American preacher called Norman Vincent Peale "The Power of Positive Thinking" and I assiduously applied that concept of positive thinking to all the negatives that inevitably arose as I went along. Now I can see that practice was more than just meditation. In those days I knew nothing of Cognitive Psychotherapy, in fact the name for it had not even been coined, but I can see now that I was being my own cognitive therapist for much of the time with only a very little help from a Person Centered psychiatrist. That self-imposed programme was years of work which became easier and easier as time passed. Fortunately for me, I did not have any real underlying or recurring mental illness, so it could work for me but, if it does not work with others and people find themselves in constantly repetitive patterns they should consult a mental health expert before they pay any more money to teachers of meditation or to a whole monastery. Today developments in CBT, known as the 'third wave', put less emphasis on what the Buddhists might call 'right thinking' and much more on feeling and action, not quite a return to the 'first wave' of primitive behaviourism, but a re-emphasis in that direction.

There are many kinds of meditation, around thirty, with many initial techniques and many bodily positions and Martine Batchelor has brought the main Buddhist ones together in her book "Meditation for Life". But many would contend that meditation is not necessarily a spiritual practice at all. Large American corporations teach it as a form of stress management. Psychologists, especially Cognitive Behavioural Therapists, use it as a form of mental hygiene. The spiritual purpose of meditation is certainly different when it is practiced within a framework of belief in the possibility of escaping through meditation into nirvana. Even then, little attempt has been made to distinguish meditation from a trance state.

Mindfulness is close to, but, I think, slightly different from, meditation as described earlier in this service, although many writers seem to completely compound the two.

Stephen Batchelor thinks “Gotama (the Buddha) described it as ‘the one way’ to achieve the kind of focused presence and responsiveness needed to function optimally on a groundless ground”. And that means, I would add, in a constantly changing unpredictable existence. Indeed Batchelor thinks that the awakening of the Buddha was nothing more nor less than this total focus on the present circumstances which involved the freeing of the self from compulsion, craving and attachment, which Gotama spoke of mindfulness. Gotama, Batchelor thinks, rejected the idea that freedom or salvation was by gaining access to an eternal ground. Rather it was gained by embracing suffering, not turning away from the world into some state of existence outside it or beyond it. So this was a life affirming view that the Buddha taught, not a life denying one, as orthodox Buddhism wrapped up in Indian rebirth and karma leads people like me to mistakenly believe.

Mindfulness seems to be more about pausing and concentrating on some aspect of your experience of the passing moment, about increasing your calm awareness of self and world together, and, especially in the Zen Buddhist tradition, about asking yourself questions about what it is that you are contemplating. It has been known as a method of increasing awareness to Gestalt psychologists since the nineteen forties. I think it is mainly to mindfulness that Stephen Batchelor refers when he claims that his Buddhism made him “more fully alive and responsive to this world”.

If you practice doing that and take the time to fully relax and appreciate some aspect of living at a time, then it becomes possible to carry over that experience of clear concentration and inner peace into the most confusing and fearful situations of everyday life. But you have to have built up the capital of time spent in mindfulness before it will work. Probably some of you, like me, will have had the experience in the middle of some apparent crisis of chaos, confusion and anxiety of an image of some calm, peaceful experience, perhaps of some recreational moment return to you and put it all in perspective. If not, it may be worth deliberately building up a bank of these moments of peace and calling them up when needed. Many of the leading Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapists and counsellors have, in recent years, become increasingly interested in what they can learn from the Buddhist traditions of self-management and Stephen Batchelor himself is still a contributor to some books in that area. Cognitive Behavioural Therapists, as good scientist-practitioners, constantly test their therapies to see if they work. So for a Buddhist atheist the most valuable thing about Buddhism is the practice of meditation and

mindfulness but not necessarily bringing all the doctrine along with it - and many psychotherapists with no interest in doctrine or any form of spirituality would agree.

Now let me turn to my second theme. For me, probably the most important thing about Stephen Batchelor's work is his search for the real person of the historical Buddha and his ejection of him as God, similarly to the Unitarian rejection of the historical Jesus, the man, as God. Just in the same way as biblical scholars came to see how wholly unreliable our scriptures are about the real Jesus and set out to discover him, so, beginning on the other side of the world, in Korea and, later in India itself, Stephen Batchelor began his quest for the historical Buddha. He studied the ancient Pali texts from the Theravada South East Asian tradition, the oldest ones we know of and the ones written nearest in time to the living man himself. The Pali texts were only discovered by the British in the nineteenth century. They are written in a dialect of Sanskrit, probably like one of the several that Gotama himself taught in. They were preserved in oral tradition for some four centuries. This fact, of course, causes one to wonder how close to the original they are but Batchelor affirms that, although they were written down in several languages, the parallels between them are almost exact, strongly suggesting that the oral tradition was well preserved. The Pali texts cover about five thousand, five hundred pages but there is a lot of repetition and only one section of the three main ones is relevant here. Stephen Batchelor combed them for references to the real life of Gotama and he went on pilgrimage and investigated all the sites that Gotama Siddhartha operated around. When Batchelor came to Europe he decided not to become an academic but he certainly works like one. All the sections of the Pali Canon that he uses to build up his picture of the real person of the Buddha are carefully referenced so that they can be critiqued by anyone else. In comparing Batchelor's quest for the historic Buddha with the parallel quest for the historical Jesus, he strikes me as about the stage of Albert Schweitzer around the turn of the nineteenth century. He is a one-man insightful writer basing his conclusions on a careful academic study of the scriptures and casting a fresh light on the person but without the backing of such a huge academic industry as the Jesus Seminar a hundred years later.

The problem is, as Batchelor states it that "For traditional Buddhists, the Buddha has come to be seen as the perfect person, to have eliminated from his mind every last

trace of greed, hatred and confusion. At the same time the Buddha is believed to have acquired faultless wisdom and boundless compassion. He is omniscient and unerringly loving. He has become God.”

The picture of Buddha Batchelor comes up with is far from the conventional serene and smiling cross-legged feudal aristocrat protected by his monastery and finding his way out of the cycle of re-incarnation into a denial of life. This is a picture that sells Buddhism to the harassed, stressed and anxious people of the West. Batchelor shows how Siddhattha Gotama, the man, could not possibly have operated as he did with a band of followers such as he had at the Deer Park and the Jade Garden in North India at the time he did, without political patronage and without the worldly relationships and intrigue that was involved in maintaining that. This immediately suggests a much more worldly-wise individual than the remote ascetic.

The traditional story of the son of the king who is shielded from all suffering until he breaks out of his secluded protection and is then shocked by illness, old age and death was not about the man who became an ascetic monk, who meditated, believed he had found the middle way and became the Buddha. That story was not about the Buddha at all but is a mythical tale related by Gotama himself about a much earlier figure, a man called Vipassi. Gotama was not the son of a king but rather of a minor nobleman, a regional governor of Sakiya a part of the kingdom of Kosala, ruled by King Pasendra with whom Siddhattha Gotama had to cope every inch of the way. It is a story of intrigue, betrayal and murder surrounding Gotama's relationship with his royal patron, King Pasendra which gave him security and access to wealth. At one point Gotama had to flee from Pasendra because his family had deceived Pasendra's family over a marriage. As Batchelor writes, "Gotama, like the rest of us, inhabited an uncertain and unpredictable world." His was a rebel community against several of the prevailing orthodoxies of the surrounding Hinduism and there were endemic hostilities rooted in that. He had to compete with several other local gurus for patronage from the king and other rich men. Stephen Batchelor finds no evidence from the Pali scriptures that Gotama ever intended to found a new religion but within his own following there were powerful people who wished to take the leadership away from him.

In just such an uncertain world it seems no surprise that the core of Gotama's teachings are mostly about how to keep your emotional balance. He taught the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path focused on mindfulness as the only way to live

in just such an uncertain world – accept uncertainty and unpredictability (what he called contingency), embrace suffering, learn how to control your desires and how to move your thinking from negative towards positive. All that seems to be about how to live the best way possible in an uncertain world.

In keeping with just such a picture of the man Gotama, Batchelor finds no evidence of metaphysical speculation. More, the famous story of the arrow suggests a certain contempt for it. In that story Buddha compares a person who is preoccupied with speculations about existence after death, the difference between mind and body and the eternity and infinity of the universe to a man who has been wounded with a poisoned arrow but refuses to have it removed until he knows “the name and clan of the person who fired it; whether the bow was a long or a cross bow; whether the arrow was hoof-tipped, curved or barbed.”

Nor does Gotama emerge from the Pali scriptures as a mystic. There is no magic about meditation and mindfulness. Thus, for him, consciousness is just what happens when an organism encounters an environment. “Just as fire,” Gotama explained, is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns – a log fire, a grass, fire, a dung fire and so on – so too consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition on which it arises.” And Batchelor concludes that consciousness has no magical capacity to break free from the field of events out of which it springs. There is, therefore, no magic about meditation.

In the Kalama Sutra the Buddha of the ancient Pali texts expresses a remarkably modern, even an existentialist view. “It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain. Do not go upon what has been heard by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon sacred teaching; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration ‘this monk is our teacher’. “Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself.”

As Stephen Batchelor’s himself writes, “I cannot claim that my version of the Buddha is somehow more true or correct than yours. All I can say is that the materials buried in the Pali Canon and elsewhere have not yet exhausted their capacity to generate more stories about Gotama and what he taught.”

Before the publication of his books, including one called “Buddhism Without Beliefs,” Stephen Batchelor was a leading teacher and writer in Buddhist circles in Europe, the UK and the USA. That book, and the “Confession of a Buddhist Atheist” studied here, drew, as might be expected, ferociously mixed reviews, especially among Western Buddhists. (Just try to imagine what Albert Schweitzer’s “The Psychiatric Study of Jesus” provoked among the hierarchy of the churches in Europe when it was published in 1912. The very idea was a blasphemy!) The Guardian on this side of the Atlantic and Time Magazine on the other, were, as you might expect more moderate, even admiring, for the pioneering historical study and the analysis of the central message. Personally, I can identify with some features of the hostile criticism, such as the complaint about Batchelor’s deliberate ignoring of the doctrine of anata, the deep scepticism of the possibility of ever knowing the self, which, as a lecturer in personality, I used to admire. But overwhelmingly, until some trained historical scholar can show that Batchelor’s unearthing of the real historical person is based on a biased selection of the selection of passages from the Pali manuscripts and an egregiously distorting interpretation of the history, I must applaud his analysis and welcome his contribution to our understanding of the great religious institutions of the world.

To return to my first theme of what Batchelor values in his Buddhism, as I said in part one of this study, 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.”

So both Christianity and Buddhism have their thinkers and scholars from within their traditions seeking to find the essence of their great originators through critical examination of their ancient scriptures. We have yet to see this happen with Islam, although there are those from outside Islam publishing critical historical and textual analyses today, I know of none from within Islam.

Finally, let me try to put all this in the global context again by repeating 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.