

IMPRESSIONS UPON READING:

Buddhism without Beliefs, a Contemporary Guide to Awakening

By Stephen Batchelor (Riverhead Books 1997)

Batchelor does a remarkable thing, he strips away the belief-baggage obtained through passing through 6th century Indian culture and leaves Buddhism as a practice that challenges its practitioners to let go of anguish. It is not a religion, at its bare roots, that comforts its adherents with promises of a better life that is to follow this one, a sure promise if one but adheres to some beliefs or rituals! [pages 16-20]

Dharma is the name of this anguish-relieving practice: . . .

“understanding anguish leads to letting go of craving, which leads to realizing its cessation, which leads to cultivating the path four phases within the process of awakening itself. Understanding matures into letting go; letting go culminates in realization; realization impels cultivation.” [page 11]

“Dharma practice starts not with belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world.” [page 40]

Pages 40-41 is where I found this insight to be rather useful and profound: “Anguish emerges from craving for life to be other than it is. In the face of a changing world, such craving seeks consolation in something permanent and reliable, in a self that is in control of things, in a God who is in charge of destiny. The irony of this strategy is that it turns out to be the cause of what it seeks to dispel. In yearning for anguish to be assuaged in such ways, we reinforce what creates anguish in the first

place.: the craving for life to be other than it is.” Batchelor then discusses the addictive (self-destructive) quality of this world-view and then observes: “Dharma practice is founded on resolve. This is not an emotional conversion, a devastating realization of the error of our ways, a desperate urge to be good, but an ongoing, heartfelt reflection on priorities, values, and purpose. We need to keep taking stock of our life in an unsentimental, uncompromising way.”

If one is familiar with 12-step programs for mastering addictions, one will recognize some of this prescription in terms of doing an uncompromising inventory of our outer and inner lives and determinedly taking steps to declare and confront what we would rather hide, both from ourselves and our peers. (But we do nothing that can hurt others in that inner and outer unburdening scheme.) The key to success is taking small daily time-steps and reminding ourselves continually of our resolves to not allow ourselves in that short segment of time to give in to our addiction. Over time a new way of thinking comes to be us. But it takes time, it can't be rushed. And we ever after remain addicts, but addicts in (hopefully continual) recovery. Some of Batchelor's rantings on page 43 remind me of this process and could come straight from a 12-step lecture:

“A commitment to dharma practice keeps us on our toes. We can notice when our resolve eases into a complacent routine, and observe how we seek to justify ourselves by seeking approval from others. We can be conscious of how we tend to ignore or escape anguish rather than understand and accept it. We can be aware that even when we gain insight into these things, we rarely behave differently in the future. Despite our overt resolve, we are still creatures of habit.”

“Resolve is activated by self-confidence, which in turn depends on the self-image we have.” . . .

On page 43 Batchelor says: “The resolve to awaken requires the integrity not to hurt anyone in the process. Dharma practice cannot be abstracted from the way we interact with the world. Our deeds, words, and intentions create an ethical ambience that either supports or weakens resolve.” Could have come from a 12-step manual. Since 12-step programs actually work, change lives for the better in astonishing ways, I

suppose managing any addiction requires the same types of inner and outer changes.

The addiction to anguish and its consolation in religion or religiosity is a theme Batchelor repeatedly attacks, like on page 43 where he suggests that belief in attaining awakening at some future time because one has had faith in earning this achievement if one just believes in it long enough is . . . “to confuse a valuable aim with an entity endowed with a shadowy, metaphysical existence. The longing for consolation might run deeper than we like to admit. It enables us to feel good about ourselves without having to do a great deal. But can we afford the luxury of consolation in a world where death is the only certainty, its time utterly uncertain, and the hereafter a hypothesis?”

Batchelor’s answer is no, of course. I agree, but also envy those so steeped in a belief system that consoles and saves them that they go happily into death expecting all sorts of pleasant experiences to be in their eternal future. That envy is tempered by the confessions I have heard from some quite old people that they still fervently hope, but as time has gone on and life has dealt them many cruel realities, they are not so sure anymore. Perhaps a full awakening is a better way to acknowledge and cope with reality and its mindless cruelties. Reality is what it is. And there is much about reality that we do not know.

I quite liked Batchelor’s discussion of ethical integrity on page 48:

. . .”the question is not ‘What is the right thing to do?’ but ‘What is the compassionate thing to do?’ This question can be approached with integrity but not with certainty. In accepting that every action is a risk, integrity embraces the fallibility that certainty disdainfully eschews.” . . . “While moral conditioning may be necessary for social stability, it is inadequate as a paradigm of integrity.”

On page 49 I also like Batchelor’s discussion of the nature and importance of friendships:

“Dharma practice is not just a question of cultivating resolve and integrity in the privacy of our hearts. It is embodied in friendships.” . . .

“We were born alone and will die alone. Much of our time is spent absorbed in feelings and thoughts we can never fully share. Yet our lives are nonetheless defined through relationships with others.”

Continuing his discussion of friendship on pages 50 and 51, Batchelor encourages friendships that, in our quest for awakening “challenge and be challenged.” He describes the way that dharma practice moves from one generation to the next only through friendships and warns against. . .”being seduced by charismatic purveyors of Enlightenment.” He likes the fellowship model, not the guru model for passing on dharma practice.

In his chapter on Becoming, Batchelor starts out with this on page 67:

“I am confused. I am confused by the sheer irrationality, ambiguity, and abundance of things coming into being at all. I am confused by having been born into a world from which I will be ejected at death. I am confused as to who or why I am. I am confused by the labyrinth of choices I face. I don’t know what to do.

“This confusion is not a state of darkness in which I fail to see anything. It is partial blindness rather than sightlessness.”

This is a complicated chapter but what I found most interesting in it was on page 71 where Batchelor says that this uncertainty and ambiguity provide an opportunity to create a “sense of purpose and direction.” When in the present in meditation there is an opportunity to create one’s self “in a specific and deliberate way.” He then discusses the ambiguity of the concept of the self, or “me:”

. . . “Instead of a fixed nugget of ‘me,’ you find yourself experiencing a medley of sensations, moods, perceptions, and intentions, working together like a crew of a boat, steered by the skipper of attention.”

Skipping over several more ‘building block’ chapters, all with valuable insights, brought me to my next stopping point to take notes in the chapter on Freedom, in particular on pages 98-99, where Batchelor says that dharma practice

. . . “is the engine that drives awareness into the heart of what is unknown.

“The questioning that emerges from unknowing differs from conventional inquiry in that it has no interest in finding an answer. This questioning starts at the point where descriptions and explanations end. It has already let go of the constraints and limitations of conceptual categories. It recognizes that mysteries are not solved as though they were problems and then forgotten. The deeper we penetrate a mystery the more mysterious it becomes. . . .

. . . “Perplexity keeps awareness on its toes. It reveals experience as transparent, radiant, and unimpeded. Questioning is the track on which the centered person *moves*. . . . Expectations of goals and rewards (such as Enlightenment) are recognized for what they are: last-ditch attempts by the ghostly self to subvert the process to its own ends. The more we become conscious of the mysterious unfolding of life, the clearer it becomes that its purpose is not to fulfill the expectations of our ego. We can put into words only the question it poses. And then let go, listen, and wait.”

There is another paragraph on page 99 that is worth considering again:

“Awakening is the recovery of that awesome freedom into which we were born but for which we have substituted the pseudo-independence of a separate self. No matter how much it frightens us, no matter how much we resist it, such freedom is right at hand. It may break into our lives at any time, whether we seek it or not, enabling us to glimpse a reality that is simultaneously more familiar and more elusive than anything we have ever known, in which we find ourselves both profoundly alone and profoundly connected to everything. Yet the force of habit is such that suddenly it is lost again and we are back to unambiguous normality.”

Can the outcome of dharma practice tempt us to withdraw enjoy our awake state in isolation? Batchelor says yes on his page 102:

“We could decide simply to remain absorbed in the mysterious, unformed, free-play of reality. This would be the choice of the mystic who seeks to extinguish himself in God or Nirvana—analogous perhaps to

the tendency among artists to obliterate themselves with alcohol or opiates. But if we value our participation in a shared reality in which it makes sense to make sense, then such self-abnegation would deny a central element of our humanity: the need to speak and act, to share our experience with others.”

Creativity is a theme often mentioned by Batchelor, and I was particularly drawn to this statement on page 104:

“Self-creation entails imaging ourselves in other ways. Instead of thinking of oneself as a fixed nugget in a shifting current of mental and physical processes, we might consider ourselves as a narrative that transforms these processes into an unfolding story. Life becomes . . . an ongoing task to complete and unfinished tale. . . . Grounded in awareness of transiency, ambiguity, and contingency, such a person values lightness of touch, flexibility and adaptability, a sense of humor and adventure, appreciation of other viewpoints, a celebration of difference.”

Batchelor’s last few pages decry the active stifling of imagination by authoritative religious institutions, even including some Buddhist traditions. Statements I particularly agreed with because of my own experiences (but not with Buddhism) and observations are these on pages 108 and 109-110:

“While originating in acts of imagination, orthodoxies paradoxically seek to control the imagination as a means of maintaining their authority. The authenticity of a person’s understanding is measured according to its conformity with the dogmas of the school. While such controls may provide a necessary safeguard against charlatanism and self-deception, they also can be used to suppress authentic attempts at creating innovation that might threaten the status quo. The imagination is anarchic and potentially subversive. The more hierarchic and authoritarian a religious institution, the more it will require that the creations of the imagination conform to its doctrines and aesthetic norms.

“Yet by suppression of the imagination, the very life of dharma practice is cut off at its source. While religious organizations may survive

and even prosper for centuries, in the end they will ossify. When the world around them changes, they will lack the imaginative power to respond creatively to the challenges of the new situation.”

. . . “Both internally, through becoming religious orthodoxies, and externally, through identifying with autocratic and even totalitarian regimes, Buddhist traditions have inclined toward political conservatism. This has contributed, on the one hand, to a tendency to mysticism and, on the other, to the postponement of personal and social fulfillment until a future rebirth in a less corrupted world.”

So what would we have if we collectively followed dharma practice and awakened as a world? That vision is saved for the last chapter, out of which I will just pick one excerpt (pages 114-115) [Batchelor makes these statements about religious Buddhism, but if you are not a Buddhist just substitute the name of your locally dominant religion as you read, the observations also seem applicable to other religions]:

“An agnostic [belief-free] Buddhist vision of a culture of awakening will inevitably challenge many of the time-honored roles of religious Buddhism. No longer will it see the role of Buddhism as providing pseudoscientific authority on subjects such as cosmology, biology, and consciousness as it did in prescientific Asian cultures. Nor will it see its role as offering consoling assurances of a better afterlife by living in accord with the worldview of karma and rebirth. Rather than the pessimistic Indian doctrine of temporal degeneration, it will emphasize the freedom and responsibility to create a more awakened and compassionate society on this earth. Instead of authoritarian, monolithic institutions, it could imagine a decentralized tapestry of small-scale, autonomous communities of awakening. Instead of a mystical religious movement ruled by autocratic leaders, it would foresee a deep agnostic, secular culture founded on friendships and governed by collaboration.”

A compassionate and collaborative society sounds attractive, yet utopian. It is a noble world vision. But the only thing under your control is you, so start there by focusing your resolve and freeing your imagination through dharma practice, and support your friends and relations in their awakening-quests as a fellow traveler, not as an authority figure. As the

12-step programs teach, accept what you cannot control, and recognize what you can, and resolve to do just that. Freedom from addiction is personal, but cannot be achieved alone. That is Batchelor's message too with respect to the common addiction to consoling beliefs that stop the dharmic journey toward awakening. Awakening requires a potentially frightening acceptance of a profound and deep unknowing. Much comfort and certainty is given up to walk the path of ethical behavior informed by compassion that leads to freedom.