

Secular Buddhism

by John Dilworth

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Last week our program was “Sharing the Dharma - bring a reading”. I read something from an article by Stephen Batchelor, whom I mentioned was the most prominent voice in the Secular Buddhism movement. Afterwards I was talking with Jerry Breakstone, who said “I don’t know anything about Stephen Batchelor. Or about Secular Buddhism... but Isn’t that what White Heron Sangha is?” This might be a good question to keep in mind this evening.

Secular Buddhism is a term that’s been showing up with increasing frequency. This is in large part due to the popularity of several books written by author and teacher Stephen Batchelor. Among them are “*Buddhism without Beliefs*” (1997), “*Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*” (2010), and “*After Buddhism: rethinking the dharma for a secular age*” (2015). Batchelor uses the label “Secular Buddhism” to describe an approach to Buddhism that he recommends, and many others have taken it up as well.

So what is it?

Let’s start with “Secular”

The word *secular* most commonly means not religious. In Europe, for nearly 15 centuries almost all aspects of life were dominated by the Catholic church, so it was useful to have a word that identified those relatively few things that were not.

Secular Buddhists understand that organized religions tend to ossify over time, and to accumulate and eventually become encumbered with hierarchies, belief systems, rituals, and so forth, that may work to obscure the fresh insights that inspired their original founding.

Secular Buddhism attempts to find and practice a form of Buddhism from which much of the traditional, more “religious” parts have been removed, while preserving what they feel are the most essential and valuable aspects.

Buddhism originally developed in societies with a feudal organization at a time when changes occurred only very gradually. Its primary concern is liberation from samsara -- the perpetual wheel of life, death, and rebirth, that is filled with suffering. It teaches the reality of past lives, as well as future ones, with the possibility of eventually attaining the state of nirvana — escape from this highly unsatisfactory revolving door.

Secular Buddhists, though, are committed more to the practice of the dharma for the sake of *this* world alone. They maintain that many issues facing the modern world, such as justice, human rights, social, racial and gender equality, and environmental degradation — concerns that were not on the radar of traditional Buddhism — should be an integral part of the world view and concern of present day practitioners.

Another thing about this word “secular” — it comes originally from the Latin “saeculum”, which means “a generation” or era — a limited period in history. Secular Buddhists believe that it is necessary and appropriate for Buddhism to change in ways that make it more compatible with each new age and each new environment that it finds itself in.

I think it’s no accident that this newish term “secular Buddhism” parallels the existing “secular humanism”. As the power and universal acceptance of the organized religions in the West began to fade, secular humanism arose — beginning around the 1930’s and 40’s — as a movement to assert that ethics and morality are possible even without the oversight of a God, or the prospect of heaven vs hell after death. That humanity, on its own, could come up with an ethically positive way of living that serves to promote the flourishing of all members of the human race.

Similarly, secular Buddhism, according to Batchelor, is concerned with “how the dharma can enable humans and other living beings to flourish in this biosphere, not in a hypothetical afterlife. Rather than emphasizing personal enlightenment and liberation, it is grounded in a deeply felt concern and compassion for the suffering of all those with whom we share this earth.”(A.B. p.16)

Next, let's talk about Buddhism, and how it is continually evolving

What we call “Buddhism” didn’t exist during the lifetime of the Buddha -- it began to evolve in India after his death. And, over the centuries, as it migrated to other parts of the world it inevitably underwent considerable change as it became absorbed by cultures with widely differing traditions, values and attitudes. We can see the results of some of this divergence in the primary traditions that are with us today: Theravadin Buddhism from Southeast Asia, Zen from Japan and Korea via China, and of course the Buddhism that comes to us from Tibet.

And the forms of those lineages that we’re mostly exposed to today are pretty different from what you might see in their countries of origin. Secular Buddhism grew out of what scholars tend to call “Buddhist modernism”, which is about the big changes that have occurred as Buddhism encountered the modern world, beginning a century or two ago.

We're pretty familiar with the way most of the early Western practitioners who brought Asian Buddhist practices to Europe and North America, such as Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, intentionally stripped away much of what they thought was primarily cultural baggage (for example ritual, dress, chanting, traditional hierarchy, expectations about monastics vs. lay practitioners, gender issues, and so forth), in order to concentrate on the essence of the practices, and to make them seem less alien and more approachable to their western students. Not only the early western practitioners, but notable Asian teachers, including Suzuki Roshi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Chogyam Trungpa, and even the Dalai Lama) have presented heavily modernized versions of the traditional teachings in order to make them more accessible to westerners. One work that helps to explain and document this shift is the 2001 book called *The New Buddhism: the Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, by one James Coleman, a sociology professor at one of California's leading Universities(!).

But you may be surprised, as I was, to learn that even in Asia, the forms of Buddhism have changed a lot in the past century or two, as the modern European world gradually impinged upon the previously comparatively stable and isolated cultures of the East.

A dramatic example of this Asian "modernization" of Buddhism occurred in Burma (present day Myanmar) beginning in the late 19th century. In 1885 the British invaded that country, captured their king and sent him into exile. Burma was a thoroughly Buddhist country, and one of the monarch's primary roles was the support and protection of this state religion. With his deportation and the consequent loss of vital support for the established Buddhist institutions, together with an onslaught of British missionaries trying to convert the country to Christianity, a popular movement began in an attempt to resurrect and strengthen the foundations of the country's native traditions, especially Buddhism. A surprising coalition of both lay and monastic Buddhists worked to bring meditation practices, which had previously been the strict province of a minority of monks, into public awareness. Retreat centers were opened to both monastics and lay people which taught a new approach to meditation that did not require prior years of intensive, full-time concentration practice. This was the birth of the "modern" Vipassana movement. Burmese monks like Mahasi Sayadaw and U Bah Kinh later taught foreigners like Joseph Goldstein and S.N. Goenka (who was from India) in these practices, which they in turn brought to the west.

Potential problems with this modern Buddhism

Last week Sylvia Alcon read from the introduction of Joseph Goldstein's book *One Dharma*, which is about the grand fondue of dharma sources that we find ourselves in today.

"Is the melting-pot approach simply creating a big mess in which essential teachings of a tradition are lost? Or is something new emerging that will revitalize dharma practice for us

all?... How much of our spiritual practice and discipline is embedded in cultural overlays from the East that are neither relevant nor helpful in our Western society? And do we sometimes water down — or leave behind — the essence of the teachings simply because they take us out of our Western physical or psychological comfort zone?” (p.3)

So how to move from a hodge-podge of miscellaneous practices that is Buddhist modernism, to a more integrated form of Buddhism that is specifically tailored for this modern age is how Batchelor views the challenge that the secular Buddhism movement is trying to address.

“Despite the secular tone and lay teachers of the various modern movements,” he says, “all have an ambivalent relation with the dogmas and hierarchies of the Buddhist institutions from which they originated. Although there may be a reduced public display of overt religiosity in their centers and a deliberate effort by teachers to present the dharma in terms of its psychological and social benefits, little effort has been made to critically reexamine the underlying worldview of Buddhism, in which are still embedded the cosmology and metaphysics of ancient India. To develop an understanding of Buddhism in any of these movements means confronting the traditional doctrines of karma, rebirth, heavens, hells, and supernormal powers.” (*After Buddhism*, p.19)

Batchelor’s method

Batchelor thinks that the way to avoid throwing out the baby with the bath water is to study the oldest Buddhist texts, make a fresh effort to extract what is truly unique, and to rearticulate the findings in language that accords with with our modern sensibilities.

His method is to study the Pali canon and other comparable sources. When he comes across the Buddha saying something that could just as well have been said by a Jain or Brahmin priest, then he takes it to be part of the broadly accepted worldview of that period — it’s not something unique to the Buddha’s dharma. Batchelor says that those elements of traditional Buddhism which he personally has had the most difficulty accepting, including karma, rebirth, heavens and hells, deities, and supernatural powers, are beliefs shared by the other Indian religions of that time -- Hinduism and Jainism.

The bracketing off of such beliefs does not, in his opinion, result in a fragmentary and emasculated dharma. Instead, the result is what for Batchelor appears to be an entirely adequate ethical, contemplative, and philosophical framework for leading a flourishing life in *this* world.

Batchelor's reformulation of Buddhism

What he comes up with is a view of the Buddha as an extremely practical and pragmatic teacher, who prefers to avoid discussions of beliefs and metaphysical questions, focusing instead on practices that will result in the reduction of suffering. The crucial components of the Buddha's teachings that survive this filtering process, he feels, are

1. the principle of conditionality (things arise and cease dependent upon specific conditions)
2. the practice of a fourfold task (reframes the Noble Truths as tasks to be undertaken — not as Truths-with-a-capital-T to be believed)
3. the perspective of mindful awareness
4. the power of self-reliance (as in the famous Kalama Sutta, where he advises not taking anything on authority — rather, go check it out for yourself)

Many people enthusiastically embrace his approach, while others accuse him of “cherry picking” — taking what suits him from the dharma, and ignoring the rest.

Public criticism of Batchelor

The most publicized area of controversy has been around the topic of rebirth.

As a young hippie In the 1970s Batchelor departed England, where he grew up, and was somewhat aimlessly bumming around India when he stumbled across the Dalai Lama's community in exile in Dharamsala. He ended up ordaining as a monk, and spent 8 years studying and practicing Tibetan Buddhism. Eventually, though, he had a “crisis of faith” — he felt he could not in good conscience continue as a Tibetan Buddhist monk without believing in rebirth. He was unable to accept the dualistic separation of mind and matter that this entails (the body dies but some undefinable non-material attribute continues on to inhabit another body.) While he was willing to take an agnostic, or “I just don't know,” attitude toward it, he felt that an unreserved faith in rebirth was a fundamental, non-negotiable requirement of his lineage. He next spent several years at a Zen monastery in Korea, where he says they “didn't care one iota about his reservations around rebirth,” meditating on the great question “What is this?” When his Korean Zen teacher passed away, he disrobed, got married, and returned to Europe to take up a life of teaching, studying, and writing about Buddhism. He's also an artist and photographer. He currently lives in southern France with his wife Martine, whom he met when they were monastics together in Korea. They often teach together; in fact Tricycle is currently sponsoring an online course on Secular Buddhism taught by the two of them, which began just this week.

In 1997, after the publication of *“Buddhism without Beliefs,”* Tricycle magazine published a debate about rebirth between Batchelor and Robert Thurman, who is also a former Tibetan Buddhist monk, and Professor of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University. In the debate both men exhibit sharp intellects and deep appreciation both for each other and for the subtleties of the topic and it’s wider implications. The debate seems to end in a good-natured draw.

When *“Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist”* appeared in 2010, Alan Wallace wrote an article in Mandala entitled [*“Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist”*](#). This was a rather biting critique of Batchelor and his work, focusing on both his rejection of rebirth, and his reinterpretations of the Buddhist teachings. Alan Wallace is from Santa Barbara, another former Tibetan Buddhist monk who has served as translator for the Dali Lama, and some years back led a couple of weekend retreats at White Heron Sangha.

Batchelor responded with [*an open letter to Wallace*](#), and shortly thereafter a third party — Steven Schettini — weighed in with a piece entitled [*“An Old Story of Faith and Doubt: Reminiscences of Alan Wallace and Stephen Batchelor”*](#). This was particularly interesting to me because all three had been monks together as young men, living in the same small house. Because he knew both men personally, he was able to discuss their debate in a way that sheds fascinating light on how what on the surface is presented as an intellectual discussion can have a strong psychological underpinning.

I highly recommend all of these writings to anyone interested in the topics and/or the authors (links included above).

Unfortunately there’s not enough time for us to get very deeply into the ins and outs of the topic of rebirth tonight, but I’d would like to highlight one thing. Although it’s tempting to conclude that a rejection of rebirth implies a position of scientific materialism — belief that physical reality, as made available to the natural sciences, is all that truly exists — I saw no evidence that this is the attitude of most secular Buddhists. The piece I read last week for our “Bring a reading” program was from an article by Batchelor entitled *“Rebirth: A case for Buddhist Agnosticism”*. As the title suggests, Batchelor was advocating for “don’t know mind,” to use the Zen phrase. While scientific materialists can be criticized for closing themselves off to possibilities that don’t agree with their creed, Batchelor turns this upside down — and I have to say I really resonated with his reasoning. His point was that by adhering to preconceived Buddhist ideas about rebirth (for example that you will be reborn into one of 6 specific realms — all of which, by the way, might easily be interpreted as projections of our current human experience — that this cuts us off from approaching death with a totally open and receptive curiosity about the enormous mystery we will be facing. What if the realities of the universe are far beyond anything our limited human brains are capable of even imagining? Modern physics, with its quantum riddles and speculations about concepts like parallel universes, definitely does not rule out this possibility. “Death, as the disintegration of the senses and the brain we now

possess,” Batchelor says, “surely must open up the possibility of a potentially infinite variety of forms of existence (and even the possibility of something beyond the very idea of existence and nonexistence.”

WHAT IS THIS???

(optional.... if there's time)

from *The Coming of Secular Buddhism*: Winton Higgins

I teach insight meditation retreats in various venues around Sydney, Australia, typically rented from Catholic nuns, and weekly practice evenings in three suburban insight meditation groups called sanghas.

These sanghas are all self-generated and have no organisational links to each other, but they march to the same drum. They are self-evidently secular, free of ritual, inclusive, egalitarian and democratic—voluntary associations like any other, the stuff of civil society. Some members may study the Pali Canon (the earliest teachings of the Buddha) in their historical context, in order to deepen their dharma practice in their own intellectually free-ranging ways. They trade tips on books, journals, blogs and websites. Ethically speaking, their conception of dharma practice extends beyond the traditional five lay precepts to tackling the big issues of today's globalised world, and many are active in progressive social movements or community work. None of these sanghas identifies exclusively with the Theravada, or any other Buddhist lineage.

A few years ago I queried an overseas visitor's use of the expression "secular Buddhism"—what could that possibly refer to? But on reflection no alternative presents itself to capture the changes that have already occurred and are intensifying in the meditation practice, sangha life and modes of communication around me. Willy-nilly, secular Buddhism is upon us.

The changes in the Sydney "dharma scene" seem to merely exemplify shifts occurring elsewhere, at least in the English-speaking world.

WHS, I ask you: do you resemble those remarks?

from Batchelor 2015 interview in Tricycle:

Q: I think it's fair to say you're a central figure—if not the central figure—in the Secular Buddhism movement. Can you define Secular Buddhism”?

A: Well, I think it's a Buddhism that is primarily concerned with two things: the personal and collective suffering of this world or this age (saeculum), and the means to respond fully to such suffering. That doesn't mean that it is only concerned with our selfish interests here and now. That would be a misreading. Because, frankly, the only thing about which we have certainty is that life—human and all other forms—has emerged on this little planet. This might be the only shot beings will ever have, and considering climate change and other challenges, we're becoming increasingly aware of the fragile and tentative nature of such life. Secular Buddhists maintain that this should be the sole focus of our wisdom and compassion. They are agnostic about supernatural truth claims. The challenge is to find ways to respond to the suffering of this world, both now and in terms of how we leave it for those who follow us after our death. That, to me, is an entirely adequate frame for a complete commitment to a way of life founded on the dharma and dedicated to all living beings. In a nutshell, this is how I would see the ethos of Secular Buddhism.