

The Buddha Delusion

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SYNOPSIS

Critically drawing on Stephen Batchelor's latest book, this paper proposes a humanistic reading of the Buddha's teachings that resists both religious dogma and fundamentalist atheism.

Buddhism and Bio-Morality

We have had nearly a hundred years of Buddhism in the West and the West is getting worse. What has Buddhism contributed to contemporary western societies? It has added a touch of gravitas and exoticism to the self-help, wisdom-while-u-wait industry. It has created a cluster of hierarchical groups wearing black or maroon skirts - each claiming orthodoxy and direct ancestral links to the Buddha himself. It has conferred a dignified aura to hard-line vegans, neo-puritans and the occasional recovering hedonist. It has granted a few celebs the chance to express platitudes for the spiritual emancipation of their fans and of paparazzi. It has managed to both sanitize the world of psychotherapy (via mindfulness-based cognitive-behavioural therapy) and re-mystify it (via trans-personal psychology). And with Mandela fading fast from the limelight, it has also given the media two new moral superstars to applaud and patronize: the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Nowadays Buddhism advertises itself as the science of happiness, providing a set of contemplative techniques and a toolbox of ethical behaviours. In doing so, it has joined forces with the multi-billion dollar positive-thinking industry. It also contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to the conception of *bio-morality* (Zupancic, 2012), the insidious ideology according to which one's illnesses, depression and distress are all due to one's negative thoughts and

attitudes. This is always handy in justifying redundancies after an economic crisis spearheaded by the *Jolly Bankers Ltd*, and responding perhaps to that good old Calvinist penchant, widespread among North-Americans and North-Europeans, for self-examination to the point of self-loathing. In short, Buddhism has become the opium of the middle-class. Could it have been otherwise? Can any perspective which is truly *other* ever hope to infiltrate our world without being coaxed into Judaeo-Christian values?

Starbucks Buddha

Contemporary mainstream Buddhism appears to have wholeheartedly inherited the misguided *universalism* of the Victorian era (McMahan, 2008). At the time, this was a response aimed at normalising the bewildering array of worldviews brought about by imperial expansion. Such normalisation fostered the belief that the experience of Truth (a reified and transcendental truth with a capital T) is the same everywhere, above and beyond cultural, ethnic and social circumstances. The bland universalism and the cheap perennial philosophising we find in popular Buddhist authors proffers the possibility of an internalised view from nowhere above the contradictory claims of religions and philosophies in a kind of purified realm of experience, a stance all the more problematic because it blatantly evades cultural diversities and ignores its own imperial connotations. It is an integral part of the enduring western tendency to assimilate and neuter Buddhist teachings by discarding their existential edge, a tendency rooted in the desire to divert the radical nature of the practice towards comforting homilies. During the Victorian era the Buddha was portrayed as a harmless and serene Victorian gentleman (McMahan, 2008). Could a contemporary portrait be that of a Facebook-Guru dishing out virtual platitudes while you sip your double macchiato at Starbucks?

Stephen Batchelor's Existential Buddhism

There are dissenting voices within Buddhism which make one aware of the existence of *Buddhisms* in the

plural. An influential and refreshingly dissonant voice in contemporary Buddhism has been that of teacher and scholar Stephen Batchelor (1990, 1994, 1997, 2010). He has consistently attempted to reclaim Buddhism from the Disneyland where it has been confined in the last few decades. His latest book (2010) continues the author's life-long entreaty for a humanistic appreciation of the Buddha's teachings. It re-describes Buddhist meditative practice in terms that strongly resonates with phenomenology and existential thought. Buddhist meditation – as I understand it - is not 'spirituality' but instead phenomenological and existential enquiry, being aware of the wider organismic field, actively and creatively adapting to the fluid nature of the world (Bazzano, 2006, 2011). It deals with – and helps one appreciate more fully – the everyday. Spirituality is in any case a problematic notion, often fostering *spiritual bypass*, i.e. the circumvention of the intricacies and the complexities of the human condition.

This book is timely and important in reclaiming the existential character of the Buddha's teachings. It is also true, however, that in stressing rationality and science as trustworthy alternatives to religious dogma, Batchelor risks abandoning religion in favour of positivism, leaving one church only in order to join another. Our post-secular culture assumes that Darwin has explained our origins, Einstein has mapped the beginnings of the cosmos and very little room is now left for blind faith. But evolutionism and scientism are new forms of religion.

Atheism and Crack-pot Crusading

So you would be forgiven for thinking, at first, that this book simply adds a Buddhist slant to the prodigious output of the anti-God industry of recent years. The book-cover, after all, sports an endorsement by no less than Christopher Hitchens, latter-day prophet not only of atheism, but also of triumphalist scientism and of neo-liberalism. In his endorsement, Hitchens writes something interesting: 'The human thirst for the transcendent, the numinous – even the ecstatic – is too universal and too important to be entrusted to the cultish and the archaic'. Transcendence here becomes an option – I am tempted to say a consumer's option - within the immanent frame. Latter-day atheism, it would seem, still has high regard for transcendence: the worship of empirical data and the elevation of science is still foundational and expresses a deep nostalgia after the demise of God. This is quite different from, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's (1989) vision of phenomenology as contemporary atheism, understood as the impossibility for the subject to make any claim of

objectivity. No longer prelude to a general ontology – as in the case of orthodox empiricism, which is the field-work of axiomatic science - but more modestly shedding light on our existence in relation to the physical, social, and historical dimension of our experience. In the name of 'atheism' much nonsense has been written by Richard Dawkins (2006), whose ignorance of theology is frightening and whose lack of social-theoretical grounding makes for a greatly impoverished perspective. Under the 'atheism' banner we also had crackpot crusades such as the one undertaken by Sam Harris (2005), author of *The End of Faith*, a book that advocates the use of torture against religious fanatics and even dreams up an ideal torture pill which would induce transitory paralysis aimed at extracting useful information in the so-called war on terror.

Batchelor sees himself as an atheist and is happy to be perceived as one. This is both good news and bad news. It is good news because *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is written by one who knows his theology and his Buddhism inside out. It is bad news because Batchelor seems to have taken on the role attributed to him by the over-simplified debates taking place in our Manichean times. This is inevitable: no matter how subtle our line of reasoning might be, we end up being defined by our actions and pronouncements.

The title proudly bears that very word, 'atheist', an adjective used here as a noun, puzzlingly next to that other equally ambivalent adjective, 'Buddhist'. To top it all, we also have 'confession', implicit homage perhaps to the revered tradition of washing dirty laundry in public, championed by Augustine and Rousseau long before the advent of reality TV, and ridiculed by Nietzsche as a self-important stab at feigning greatness. Thankfully, we get very few confessions here. The autobiographical sketches plaited into the book along with fragments of the Buddha's life and more doctrinal considerations, speak of the author's progression from 'pastoral hippy' to Buddhist monk, scholar and layman. We read accounts of Batchelor's life-long engagement with Buddhism; the writing is graceful and precise, registering the beauty and poignancy of life in a style that is the most tangible expression of the author's dedication to meditative practice and the embodiment of Buddhist principles. A constant theme running through the book is the refusal to accept the consolations of religious belief. But then autobiography too is consolation, a kind of mourning even, for a self that continues to evade us, while exerting temporary control over the way in which one is being perceived. So in this sense, this book is a confession. With fluid reflections becoming solidified on the printed

page, the author's subtle agnosticism becomes however moulded into a coarser shape: thus the agnostic becomes atheist. There are hints at times that Batchelor the artist longs to come out more and express in more ambivalent ways the ambivalence of life, but Batchelor the rationalist won't let him. The author's love of Zen expresses the quirky and finely tuned aesthetic appreciation of imperfect phenomena in a tradition which at its core sacralises the everyday in ways not too dissimilar from affirmative art. Now *that* would be a more convincing secularist claim, one that does not solidify into the metaphysical statements of hard science.

Batchelor the logician has, however, retrieved a niche in contemporary Buddhism, his persona invested with the task of fulfilling the unspoken demands of hundreds of practitioners shy of the tougher and more conflicting aspects of Buddhist practice, i.e. surrender to the teacher, the great faith and the determination necessary for throwing oneself fully into what Dōgen Zenji called 'the great ocean of Buddhism'. Batchelor himself of course would have not arrived at his own insights without a life-long commitment to the discipline of first Tibetan Buddhism and later Korean Zen, something he readily acknowledges. I am all too painfully aware of how surrender, faith and determination become without fail pathological traps that hinder rather than liberate one. I am all too aware of how institutional Buddhism is political, hierarchical and sectarian. On the other hand, the 'non-denominational' Buddhism which Batchelor helped establish in the West reveals itself under close scrutiny to be yet another set of little parishes and churches with their own enclaves, their own revered teachers, and their own brand of unquestioned, blandly secular beliefs, in a sort of neutered, de-cafeinated approach to Buddhist practice that largely leaves the self smugly unscathed.

Agnostic or Atheist?

In describing his current perspective, Batchelor seems to have almost entirely discarded the term 'agnostic', which was prevalent in his other books, for the seemingly more incisive and polemical 'atheist'. *Agnostic* is mentioned three times as synonymous with *atheist*. The two terms, however, are worlds apart. To be an atheist in our current discourse means to oppose the notion of a creator, to distance oneself from the ancient legacy of monotheism, or indeed of *monolatry* (the idolatrous belief in one exclusive and exclusivist deity) and to advocate a more rational, scientific outlook and explanation of reality. The atheist no longer believes in a bearded omnipotent world-designer perched

on a heavenly cloud; instead, he believes in that cosmic premature ejaculation known as the Big Bang. Religion here gives way to scientism, and both systems are unable to accept the profound ambivalence of our condition, hurrying instead to the superstore of ready-made answers. Yet doing away with God means doing away with foundational thought, accepting that groundless ground which is at the heart of the Buddha's teachings but also at the heart of existential phenomenology. It also means doing away with the numerous *shadows* of God, the most obvious being, in secular societies, the belief in science and evolutionary biology as new metaphysical certainties. This is maybe a wrong assumption on my part, but I seriously doubt whether anyone in the anti-God contingent has the faintest idea of what is meant by atheism as non-foundational mode of thought.

Agnostic too has become as harmless in current discourse as *atheist*, conveying a vague, lukewarm absence of commitment, paired with a yawning nod at Pascal's wager. I would like to suggest that its implications are deeper: to my mind, agnostic means both *not-knowing* as well as *non-Gnostic*. An agnostic is one who does not know. Not-knowing is the very essence of Zen Buddhist practice as I understand it (and very close to how Batchelor teaches it) the awakening of that profound perplexity that helps me reconsider my relation to the world, the self, and others. Perplexity (not *doubt*, as I had previously believed, and as Batchelor himself personally helped me clarify) reawakens a sense of wonder and a keen awareness of the fleeting nature of life. This is a deep perplexity, a deep naïveté even: learning to look at the world afresh time and time again (a position common to both Shunryu Suzuki's *beginner's mind* and to Merleau-Ponty's *perpetual beginner*). A stance deepening as one's meditative practice matures: all this is not akin to doubt, as emphasized in some Zen teachings, for doubt is problematic. Cartesian in essence, doubt requires a detachment of the doubting subject from the life-world, what Batchelor calls the 'contingent nature of life'. The author writes of 'deep agnosticism', a stance which is beyond a lukewarm and conventional not-knowing:

To say 'I don't know' is not an admission of weakness or ignorance, but an act of truthfulness: an honest acceptance of the limits of the human condition when faced with 'the great matter of life and death'. This deep agnosticism is more than the refusal of conventional agnosticism to take stand on whether God exists or whether the mind survives the bodily death. It is the willingness to embrace the fundamental bewilderment of a finite, fallible creature as the basis for leading a life that no longer clings to the superficial

consolations of certainty. (Batchelor, 2010, p. 66)

Equally problematic is the crystallisation of great doubt into a realisation – canonical in most Zen schools - because this would bring back the notion of mystical knowing, of revelation being bestowed upon a worthy individual. In emphasizing the growing sense of perplexity that is brought about by one's practice, and in resisting the temptation to define awakening through religious language, Batchelor neatly escapes the trap into which most contemporary Buddhist teachers and writers all too-happily tumble: the reification of the process of awakening, paired with the assumption that one has visited a numinous dwelling and has come back with the truth.

Perhaps the title is controversial after all, since it has provoked the anger of Buddhists of all orientations. Even positive reviewers have managed to sound politely derogatory, indirectly pointing out that the author has admitted that he has had no earth-shattering breakthroughs or insights. The implication is that he does not possess enough clout to dare to criticise orthodox Buddhist doctrine. Much like the beatification of saints to be, resting on visions and ectoplasmic visitations, the cohesion of many Buddhist groups heavily depends on the assumption that their teacher is just back from Nirvana, has bought the t-shirt and a brand-new *sat nav* with the voice of Gautama giving instructions on how to get there by the quickest route.

Non-Gnostic, the second meaning I attribute to 'agnostic', means doing away with the Gnostic sensibility, common to influential brands of both religious and secular thought throughout the centuries, a worldview common to Manicheism, Zoroastrianism, Heideggerian pseudo-existentialism, Tibetan Buddhism, new age cults, and groups found at the margins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is a sensibility permeated by metaphysical anxiety and psychological alienation and by a resultant need for salvation and redemption. The Gnostic sees the individual abandoned in a world emptied of the divine, and the cosmos as a battlefield where each individual replicates the universal drama, the conflict between external repressive forces and an 'interiority' that must be protected and defended. However diversely this might be conveyed, the Gnostic perspective fathoms a way out from the wheel of rebirth, the alienation of a materialistic world, the vale of tears etc. Only in a vertical or totalising mode of transcendence can he envision salvation. To be 'thrown' into this imperfect world means, for the Gnostic, to be exiled. The core teachings of the Buddha, as re-assembled in Batchelor's book, encourage us instead to

enter the stream, to engage with the world more fully by opening ourselves up to its suffering, by understanding the conditioned nature of existence, and by abandoning our exaggerated fondness for our sense of place and identity:

This Dhamma I have reached is deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined by thought, subtle, sensed by the wise. But people love their place: they delight and revel in their place. It is hard for people who love, delight and revel in their place to see this ground: this conditionality, conditioned arising. (Batchelor, 2010, p. 127)

An agnostic stance implies the refusal to bargain one's willingness to appreciate the flawed and unpredictable world of phenomena for any notion of a more perfect dimension: Brahman, Platonic idea, reified Nirvana, Being behind becoming, Kantian noumenon, Husserlian essence, Heideggerian *Dasein*.

An Encounter with Levinas

In May 1979, a 25-year old Batchelor, recently ordained monk in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, went to a lecture by Levinas on Husserl and phenomenology. Meeting the philosopher disappointed him, although he ends up acknowledging an indirect influence in two passages of the book: Levinas's doubts about Buddhism's denial of the finality of death made Batchelor's question the doctrine of rebirth. Towards the end of the book, we also find an apposite correlation between Levinas's ethical stance and Shantideva's moral and affective articulation of the Buddhist notion of *sūnyatā*, or 'emptiness'.

I sympathise with Batchelor: studying the philosophy of Levinas changed me, yet I had noticed fatigue settling in, the sheer tiredness of the ethical obligation to the other, central in Levinas's ethics and so easily prone to mutate into dutiful and unhealthy self-abnegation. Questioned during the lecture as to *how* phenomenologists achieve *epoché* (phenomenological reduction or 'bracketing'), Levinas had no answer. It was an excellent question; Batchelor believes, as I do, that the answer is meditation. 'After the lecture' – Batchelor writes,

I joined a group of students for dinner with M. Levinas. He seemed wary of Buddhism- and being confronted by a shaven-headed man with wire-rimmed glasses in a long red skirt probably did little to mitigate that wariness. He appeared to have made up his mind about Eastern religions in general and showed no interest in exploring the subject further. I found his attitude dismissive and haughty. In his manner too he struck me as guarded. He rarely smiled. He spent most of the evening discoursing to the cluster of awestruck undergraduates around him who hung on

his every word. Since much of the discussion (in French) concerned technical issues in phenomenology, I had difficulty following. Then at one point, after praising a point in Heidegger's philosophy, he suddenly stood up and declared: *Mais je détestais Heidegger. C'était un nazi!* (Levinas, like Husserl, was Jewish). (Batchelor, 2010, p. 53)

Reading Heidegger's *Time and Being* had an impact on Batchelor, who on this occasion did not submit the text to as rigorous a scrutiny as he had done with Buddhist texts. Not only did Heidegger truly believe that Nazism would shield Europe from 'the materialism of the Soviets' and 'the superficiality of America'; he also never retracted his position. *Being-in-the-world*, an Heideggerian notion of great promise, attempting to rewrite the conventional idea of individuality – remained simply unfulfilled. Under the guise of 'phenomenology', Heidegger traded both good old fashion individualism (concealed in mystical garment), and closeted theology, with capitalised concepts playing the part of God. Batchelor's self-confessed penchant for the writings of theologians (Tillich, Cupitt) and closet theologians (Heidegger) makes one wonder how truly 'secular' his secularism is, and how closely related to religion secularism in general really is. Batchelor comes clean about this; quoting Don Cupitt, he supports the idea of a 'beliefless religion'. This reminded me of Kant's assertion that he lived in an age of enlightenment but not an enlightened age, echoed by Charles Taylor's claim that we live in a secular age, but not necessarily an age of secularism. We still have a long way to go...

Of the Buddha as a Strong Poet

There is something distinctive in the Buddha's teachings, at variance, according to Batchelor, with the Indian worldview of its time. They are also different, I would add, from Buddhist orthodoxies of our time – both the pious platitudes of contemporary religious Buddhism and the cognitive redecorations of 'mindfulness meditation'. Batchelor offers a compelling perspective, envisioning Gautama Buddha as a man of his time who, having absorbed the ideologies and biases of his era, having become proficient in the yogic practices of his day, ends up creating an entirely new path and a new perspective. This reminds me of Harold Bloom's (1997) and Richard Rorty's (1989) notion of the *strong poet*, of one who slowly but surely creates a new language and opens up new vistas.

Using the vast patchwork source known as the 'Pali canon', and readily acknowledging that his own reading of it is as selective and as biased as any other existing

Buddhist commentary, Batchelor (2010) identifies four core elements that cannot be derived from the Indian culture of [the Buddha's] time: 1. The *principle* of 'this-conditionality, conditioned arising'. 2. The *process* of the Four Noble Truths. 3. The *practice* of mindful awareness. 4. The *power* of self-reliance. (p. 237). For Batchelor 'these four axioms provide a sufficient ground for the kind of ethically committed, practically realized, and intellectually coherent way of life Gotama anticipated' (ibid). It remains to be seen whether these principles would provide, as well as a new kind of culture (something that in his previous *Buddhism without Beliefs* Batchelor has neatly described as 'culture of awakening'), also a new kind of *civitas*. The societal corollaries of Buddhist practice are not explored. After all, like Plato, sages of old are not renowned for translating their free-thinking into the vision of a just society. The insistence of Batchelor's Buddha on loosening the attachment to identity has great resonance. It is this very attachment that prevents us from recognizing the conditioned nature of existence. Why?

Because people are blinded to the fundamental contingency of their existence by attachment to their place. One's place is that to which one is most strongly bound. It is the foundation on which the entire edifice of one's identity is built. It is formed through identification with a physical location and social position, by one's religious and political beliefs, through that instinctive conviction of being a solitary ego. One's place is where one stands, and whence one takes a stand against everything that seems to challenge what is 'mine'. This stance is your posture vis-à-vis the world: it encompasses everything that lies on this side of the line that separates 'you' from 'me' (Batchelor, 2010, p. 128)

This is also the stance on which the nation-state is built, if we accept Martin Buber's (1983) vision of the nation-state as an extension of the ego-self. The social and political implications of abandoning one's place, of loosening the tight grip on one's identity are enormous, especially considering the growing intolerance throughout the world towards migrants and 'non-citizens' along with the disturbing rise of unsightly forms of patriotism, and the fact that the very *raison d'être* of empire is exporting identity (Bazzano, 2012).

Crucial to Batchelor's (2010) interpretation of the Buddha's teachings is the relinquishing of one's place (*ālaya*) and arriving at a ground (*tthāna*) which is not solid but instead 'the contingent, transient, ambiguous, unpredictable, fascinating and terrifying ground called "life"' (p 128). The Buddha called this experience 'entering the stream', an expression reminiscent of Heraclitus, who

similarly emphasized the river-like nature of experience. Gautama Buddha's example shows not only that it is possible to abandon our tight grasp on identity without losing our minds, but that one can in fact gain a greater sense of freedom and sanity. Equally crucial is that this awakening is a shift of perspective rather than 'the gaining of privileged knowledge into some higher truth'. The Buddha

[S]poke only of waking up to a contingent ground – 'this-conditional, conditioned arising' – that until then had been obscured by his attachment to a fixed position. While such an awakening is bound to lead to a reconsideration of what one 'knows', the awakening itself is not primarily a cognitive act. It is an existential readjustment, a seismic shift in the core of oneself and one's relation to others and the world.

Of the Dharma as a Raft

For Batchelor (2010), Gautama Buddha was a human being who experienced this radical shift of perspective rather than the God-like figure he became in subsequent Buddhist iconography: omniscient, without a remaining trace of greed, anger and ignorance, and endowed with infinite wisdom and compassion. Instead, we have a Buddha who faces craving and the other 'armies of Mara' (the Devil) even after his awakening. He is no longer being manipulated by Mara, Batchelor tells us, but nevertheless those tempting thoughts, feeling and emotions still linger because the Buddha is still human. This is very encouraging to any practitioner. I don't know whether it avoids the Anglo-Saxon error Nietzsche once attributed to George Eliot, which consists in getting rid of the transcendental whilst recycling the ethical postulates of religion. Another task of a secular Buddhism might well be a beneficial and humorous critique of the more sanctimonious, life-denying, politically-correct attitudes to Buddhist practice, given that a straight-laced, ecologically sound, über-sensible position towards ethics is but a remnant of the other-worldly domain. Flawed and deeply human the Buddha might be, but he is never entirely let go of. If he is not a God, he is still a moral superhero. But the Buddha was after all the greatest swindler who ever lived, a spinner of tales, the prime mover of the absurdist Circus known as Buddhism. Perhaps a truly secular Buddhism would at regular intervals throw away the baby Buddha and his insufferable holy bath water: as a sign of love, of course, of too great and too tough a love to allow itself to be swamped by soppy devotion and smug rationalism.

Batchelor fittingly reminds us of the famous parable of the raft. The Dharma is a raft, the Buddha said, assembled with bits of wood and branches, useful to cross the river and reach the other shore. It would be pointless to make a shrine of it once you crossed the water. Across the centuries the raft has been elevated to divine status and in its name powerful institutions have been created, led and organized by the St. Pauls and the Richelieus of the Buddhist world. One of them was Kassapa, credited in Zen folklore to have smiled when the Buddha silently held a flower one day in lieu of a sermon. As it turns out, Mr. Kassapa was a shrewd politician, a quality often found in institutional Buddhism. Perhaps this is not a bad thing: someone has to preserve and recycle tradition. And someone else has to knock it down and start afresh. 5

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