

**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE AGNOSTIC
BUDDHISM OF STEPHEN BATCHELOR**

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the agnostic Buddhism of contemporary scholar and practitioner Stephen Batchelor. The main question under examination is whether the essence of Buddhism is undermined when interpreted through Batchelor's agnostic and "belief-free" lens. In an attempt to answer this question, Batchelor's main philosophical texts – Alone With Others, The Faith to Doubt, and Buddhism Without Beliefs – are analysed, as are three critiques of his work written by Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Sangharakshita. It is concluded that while Batchelor is discarding many of the conventional trappings of Buddhism, he is not placing its integrity at risk.

RÉSUMÉ

L'étude qui suit examine l'approche agnostique du penseur et praticien bouddhiste Stephen Batchelor. Sous examen est la question de la possibilité que l'essence même du bouddhisme soit minée par le point de vue agnostique et "sans croyances" de Batchelor. En tentant de répondre à cette question les textes primordiaux de l'œuvre de Batchelor (Alone With Others, The Faith to Doubt, et Buddhism Without Beliefs) seront analysés, ainsi que trois critiques de son œuvre par Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, et Sangharakshita. On pourra en conclure que malgré que Batchelor rejette grand nombre des notions conventionnelles du bouddhisme, il ne menace point son intégrité.

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PREFACE

What happens when a foreign belief system migrates to a new land? Throughout history, the merging of various cultural and religious traditions has produced a dynamic and ever-changing fusion of rituals, beliefs, and social norms. This fusion has also created debate among traditionalists, who often view the merging of traditions as a misguided cultural loss, and modernists, who view such change as an inevitable and exciting opportunity for new spiritual growth. Motivated by the fear of loss, traditionalists often claim that their religion must be adhered to in its original word and form. Modernists, however, often attempt to assist in the act of integration through linguistic and cultural translation that not only makes the religion accessible to new believers, but also updates it to reflect modern-day concerns.

This phenomenon of integration and adaptation is presently occurring in Western Buddhist communities. Although Europeans gained knowledge of Buddhism as early as the thirteenth century, it was only in the twentieth century that it began to take hold in the Western world as a form of spiritual practice.¹ It was not until the 1960s that cohesive spiritual communities, *sanghas*, began to form in both Europe and North America, prompted both by the arrival of Buddhist leaders to the Western world and the travel of many young Westerners to Asia. Thus began a dialogue and a process of integration between Asian systems of thought and Judeo-Christian-influenced Western values and traditions. Stephen Batchelor describes this process in the following manner:

The forms Buddhism assumes as an institutional religion are always contingent upon historical conditions. Each Asian country in which Buddhism took root has

¹ Batchelor, Stephen. The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994) xii.

produced its own distinct variant of the Dharma...And if it is to take root in Europe [and North America] a similar pattern of adaptation will inevitably follow.²

This analysis suggests that dialogue between multiple cultural systems leads inevitably to adaptation.

Stephen Batchelor is a Western Buddhist practitioner and author who has devoted his energies to the merging of classical Buddhist and modern Western values. He is a linguistic translator, transforming many important Tibetan and Korean texts into English, as well as a cultural mediator. The philosophical stance employed by Batchelor in his attempt to present Buddhism to a mainstream audience has sparked much debate in Western Buddhist communities. Critiques have been written in response to his philosophy, in particular to his book Buddhism Without Beliefs in which he espouses a philosophy of agnostic Buddhism.

The current study evaluates whether these critiques are justified, through an examination of the nature of Batchelor's philosophical stance, his cultural mediation, and the implications of his agnostic vision of Buddhism. It attempts to uncover the assumptions underlying the critiques as well as Batchelor's philosophy. Whereas the critics feel that Batchelor is discarding the essence of Buddhism, Batchelor feels that belief systems inhibit this essence – which is, paradoxically, that there is no essence – from making its presence felt. The main issue under examination is whether, according to Batchelor's agenda, Buddhism ceases to be Buddhism.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of the issues discussed throughout this paper. It begins with a brief resumé of Stephen Batchelor's academic and monastic

² Batchelor, Awakening of West 277.

education, and it highlights some of the many influences that have helped to shape his philosophical approach. Secondly, it briefly discusses Batchelor's spiritual agenda as outlined in his three main philosophical texts – Alone With Others (1983), The Faith to Doubt (1990), and Buddhism Without Beliefs (1997).

Chapter two examines three critiques that have been leveled against Stephen Batchelor. Although all three of these critiques are directed towards Buddhism Without Beliefs, they raise important issues that are relevant to all of Batchelor's writings and which serve as a good launching pad to analyse Batchelor's agnostic Buddhism. The critiques to be examined are those of Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Sangharakshita, three of the most prominent voices of opposition to Buddhism Without Beliefs. Although they each raise similar issues of contention, they approach them from slightly different angles.

The third chapter examines the first dimension of Batchelor's project, his philosophical thought, in order to later determine whether the critiques directed against him are justified. All three of Batchelor's main philosophical texts are surveyed. Of primary importance is his stance on belief (or, rather, non-belief) and how this colors his interpretation of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment. His theory of agnosticism is then examined, and the differences between agnosticism and scepticism are discussed.

Chapter four examines the second dimension of Batchelor's project – his cultural translation. Cultural translation is here defined as the ability to integrate multiple cultural frameworks, and the ability to make foreign concepts accessible and relevant. Does Batchelor succeed in this role, or does his desire to integrate Buddhism into a Western cultural framework lead to a watering down of Buddhist doctrine? In discussing

Batchelor's role as a cultural translator, two other books of his, The Awakening of the West (1994) and Verses From the Center (2000) are introduced. Both of these books, one a survey of how Buddhism infiltrated the West, and the other a poetic and accessible translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, illustrate that one of Batchelor's goals is to translate the messages of classical Buddhism into a language that modern Westerners can comprehend. Yet they also raise questions as to whether the message of Buddhism is being distorted.

Chapter five returns to the critiques directed toward Batchelor and to the question of whether or not they are defensible. Vital questions are asked both of the critics and of Batchelor's work, and the assumptions underlying their arguments are uncovered. It is concluded that much of the conflict between Batchelor and his critics arises from their differences of opinion as to where the context for action, ethics, and the basis for the spiritual life is located.

Finally, chapter six ties together many of the arguments introduced throughout the paper. It concludes that Batchelor is indeed challenging the religiosity of Buddhism both through his philosophy and in his role as a cultural translator, but that this is done in a manner that attacks only its institutional structures rather than its core. Thus, because Batchelor's challenge stems from a motivation to expose and to make relevant the Dharma, his particular interpretation of Buddhism should still be called Buddhism. Whether or not Batchelor's vision of Buddhism will avoid the grip of assimilation remains to be seen.

Throughout this paper I make reference to "East" and "West" as well as to that elusive thing called "Western Buddhism". Although Batchelor also uses such

distinctions in much of his writing, he states simultaneously that “Western Buddhism” is a concept that does not exist, as “the Dharma finds its form not because there’s some essential Dharma that dresses up in Tibetan robes or Japanese robes. What the Dharma is, in that instant, is that particular manifestation, and it needs to be respected as such.”³ Batchelor feels that Buddhism is simply Buddhism in no matter what cultural framework it is found. According to Batchelor, Buddhism does not need to be preceded by the adjectives “Western” or “Eastern”. In light of this, I have been careful not to impose East/West distinctions on Batchelor’s thought where he has not imposed them himself.

³ Batchelor, Stephen. “Deep Agnosticism: A Secular Vision of Dharma Practice” in Buddhism in America: Proceedings From the First Buddhism in America Conference. Al Rapaport, ed. (Vermont: Tuttle, 1998) 188.

METHODOLOGY

As a Western student of Buddhism, I am interested in how Buddhism is being formulated as it expands from its Asian origins. I am interested in the debates that ensue when an age-old tradition finds itself again in its formative years, trying to rearticulate itself to suit a new cultural context. It is for these reasons that I am drawn to Stephen Batchelor, whose goal is to articulate a new and relevant Buddhism.

My goal in this paper is to examine Batchelor on his own terms and in his own words. As such, this study focuses mainly on primary source material. Aside from the three critiques under discussion, I do not address any other commentaries of Batchelor's work.

I chose Bhikkhu Punnadhammo's, Bhikkhu Bodhi's, and Sangharakshita's critiques primarily because they were the most prominent and most interesting voices of opposition to Batchelor's work. I chose to focus on all of Batchelor's main philosophical texts, for they are inter-related and they illustrate a progression of thought. The majority of my biographical information on Batchelor comes directly from Batchelor himself, who provided me with a detailed resumé of his life and work.

Whereas the first half of this paper outlines the issues under discussion in a fairly objective manner, the second half provides more original thought and personal analysis.

CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUES

This chapter provides an overview of Batchelor's life, work, and philosophical stance in order to orient the reader to the various concepts that will be raised throughout the paper.

1.1) Biographical Information

Stephen Batchelor is a contemporary Buddhist thinker with an extensive personal history of Buddhist practice and scholarship. Born in Dundee, Scotland in 1953, he completed his secondary education in Watford, England. In 1972, at the age of nineteen, Batchelor became a student at The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharmasala, India. His teachers at this Tibetan institute were Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, Geshe Rabten, and Serkong Tsenshap Rinpoche. In 1975, he left India for the Tibetan Monastic Institute in Rikon, Switzerland, and two years later he moved to Tharpa Choeling: Centre for Higher Tibetan Studies in Le Mont-Pelerin, Switzerland. His teacher throughout this time remained Geshe Rabten. Batchelor's study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism continued in Hamburg, Germany, where he was a student at Tibetisches Zentrum under the instruction of Geshe Thubten Ngawang from 1979 to 1980.

Throughout these years of study, Batchelor underwent two ordinations. In 1974 he became a Getsul (*shramanera*), a novice monk, and in 1978 he became a Gelong (*bhikshu*), a fully ordained monastic.

During his years of practice both as a novice and as a monk, Batchelor felt a growing discomfort with institutional Buddhism in general and with Tibetan philosophy and practice in particular. In his book The Faith to Doubt Batchelor describes his disillusionment with the Tibetan system and his attraction to Zen: “Once inside the system, there is no room for doubt. The teacher is enlightened, and the path complete and perfect. Everything you need to know has been accounted for; it is just a matter of putting the teachings into practice.”⁴ As well as this growing discomfort with the type of faith required of him, a number of other transformative factors signaled to Batchelor that it was time to leave the Tibetan tradition. As described in The Faith to Doubt, the first of these factors was the discovery of insight meditation (*vipassanā*), a technique of concentrated mindfulness, which Batchelor found more effective than the Tibetan practices being taught by his teachers.

Secondly, Batchelor came across the *Kalama Sutta*⁵ in which the Buddha is recorded as stating: “Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances...when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good, then accept them and follow them.”⁶ This message of self-reliance was the opposite of the messages of devotion being stressed by his teachers. Batchelor found it to be a refreshing change of perspective.

As well as delving into Buddhist literature, Batchelor also began studying Western philosophy and existentialism. The writings of Martin Buber in particular had

⁴ Batchelor, Stephen. The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990) 9.

⁵ The Kalama Sutta is found in the Anguttara Nikaya, Tika Nipata, in the Pali Canon. In this Sutta the Buddha tells his students that it is proper to have doubt and perplexity and that they should not be led by tradition or hearsay. This Sutta is the main text used to illustrate the tenets of free enquiry within Buddhism.

⁶ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 9.

an enormous impact on his psyche, especially Buber's philosophy of the unreliability of our perceptions of the world.⁷

There was one more factor that influenced Batchelor's decision to leave the Tibetan tradition. One day while he was walking in the woods, he had what he describes as a "mystical" experience. He became acutely aware of the intense beauty and the intense mystery of life. He says that this experience provided no concrete answers but "revealed the massiveness of the question." He also writes: "From that time on my practice of Buddhism has been one of unraveling the perception of life and the world revealed in those moments."⁸

The inner conflict created by this ongoing existential crisis led Batchelor to seek psychotherapy. From 1976 to 1981, while still a Tibetan Buddhist monk, Batchelor underwent Jungian therapy in Zollikon, Zurich with Dora Kalff, who had been trained by Carl Jung's wife Emma Jung. Batchelor also read widely the writings of Jung and his followers, and attended numerous seminars in Jungian psychology.

In 1981, his psychoanalysis completed and his ties with the Tibetan community temporarily severed, Batchelor entered Songgwang Sa Monastery in South Korea, headed by Kusan Sunim. Suddenly he was immersed in an environment of "radical questioning"⁹ that not only allowed for, but also honored, doubt. At the monastery he was confronted constantly by the questions "what is it?", "what?", "what is this?", the favorite koans of Kusan Sunim. This incessant questioning of everything that is normally taken for granted was precisely what Batchelor needed at this stage in his life. The doors of questioning that had been shut during his Tibetan training were now wide open.

⁷ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 12.

⁸ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 10.

In 1985, at the age of 32, Batchelor disrobed and assumed the life of a householder. He states in an interview: “I saw less and less reason to remain as a monk by the end of my Zen training. It had, in a sense, served its purpose.”¹⁰ After disrobing, Batchelor moved back to Europe and married Martine Fages, whom he had met at the Songgwang Sa Monastery and with whom he had co-edited a book of Kusan Sunim’s teachings. Batchelor was still very much committed to Buddhism and continued his involvement as a lay practitioner. Since his disrobing he has been highly involved in community projects and education. From 1992 to 1996 he coordinated the Sharpham Trust, from which the Sharpham College for Buddhist Studies and Contemporary Enquiry developed. Until 2000 Batchelor was director of studies at this unique college which, along with various community programs, holds bi-yearly ten week long courses that combine Buddhist thought with Western philosophy, body work, gardening, and communal living. As well, he is a founding member of the Network for Western Buddhist Teachers, an affiliated member of the University of Bristol Centre for Buddhist Studies, and a guiding teacher at Gaia House in Devon, England.

Stephen Batchelor is also a prolific author. He began his philosophical musings in 1983 with Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism, which expresses the seeds of his discontent with the formalization and institutionalization of Buddhism. The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty (1990) follows from Alone With Others by stressing the importance of the doubting and questioning elements of Buddhism. These ideas flower to fruition in Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening (1997). It is here where Batchelor makes explicit his philosophy of

⁹ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 26.

¹⁰ Batchelor, <http://www.dharma.org/insight/batchelor.htm> 6.

agnostic Buddhism. His most recent philosophical work, Verses From the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime (2000), contains both a short essay on Nāgārjuna and a poetic translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

As well as these philosophical texts Batchelor is also the author of The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture (1994), which outlines the history of Buddhism in the West. He has translated three texts by Geshe Rabten, as well as Shantideva's A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. He is editor and translator of a number of books¹¹, and his articles and essays have appeared in various anthologies and magazines, most commonly Tricycle Magazine, of which he is a contributing editor.

A prolific writer, an engaged Buddhist, a community activist, and an instigator of much debate, Stephen Batchelor is indeed an influential figure in contemporary Western Buddhism. The nature of his controversial philosophies is outlined briefly in the following section.

1.2) An Overview of Batchelor's Philosophical Project

Stephen Batchelor's vision of Buddhism is one of an active agnosticism. Batchelor claims that Buddhism's institutionalization solidified into doctrine much of the

¹¹ Batchelor is the editor of The Way of Korean Zen. Kusan Sunim. (New York/Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1985); The Jewel in the Lotus: A Guide to the Buddhist Traditions of Tibet. (London/Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987); The Practice of Generosity: First Steps Towards a Buddhist Economics. (Sharpham, Devon: Sharpham Trust, 1993); The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and our Day-to-Day Lives. with Gay Watson and Guy Claxton. (London: Rider, 1999). He is the translator of Shantideva. A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. (Dharmasala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979); Geshe Rabten. Echoes of Voidness. (London/Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1983); Geshe Rabten. Song of Profound View. (London/Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1989); Geshe Rabten. The Mind and its

religion's spirit of questioning. Batchelor advocates a return to the doubting and questioning origins of Buddhism so that practitioners do not cling to doctrine for security. He states, "an agnostic Buddhist looks to the Dharma for metaphors of existential *confrontation* rather than metaphors of existential *consolation*"¹² and thus practitioners should not be afraid to proclaim, "I don't know". One of Batchelor's goals is to tug the rug of security from underneath the feet of modern practitioners. He encourages practitioners to make the Dharma an active force rather than a passive doctrine and to take advantage of the unique opportunity currently present in the West as the Dharma is still in its formative stages.

In Alone With Others Batchelor explains that in our consumer-oriented culture we have become preoccupied with "having" instead of "being". We have become infatuated with possessing things, including religion. In this state of mind "enlightenment and eternal life are conceived as things that can be *obtained* by each individual"¹³ instead of ideas that challenge us on the most fundamental levels. According to Batchelor, the more we treat religion as an acquisition the more detached from ourselves we become and the more existential alienation we feel.

This phenomenon of "having", or possessing, is both the cause and the result of the increased institutionalization of Buddhism. Says Batchelor: "One consequence of this process of formalization and institutionalization is that the religion becomes reabsorbed into the dimension of having" and hence its beliefs, symbols, and rituals are reified and

Functions: A Textbook of Buddhist Epistemology and Psychology. (Mt. Pelerin, Switzerland: Rabten Choeling, 1991)

¹² Batchelor, Stephen. Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening. (New York: Riverhead, 1997) 18.

¹³ Batchelor, Stephen. Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism. (New York: Grove Press, 1983) 28.

concretized.¹⁴ Religion thus becomes a “receptacle of facts and information” rather than a force that encourages us to confront what Batchelor feels is the most important question: “What is the meaning and purpose of life in the light of inevitable death?”¹⁵

Rather than adopt Buddhist doctrine as simply one more acquisition, practitioners should accept the challenge of existential confrontation. Batchelor asserts that the existential aspects of Buddhism teach us how to live both with ourselves and with others. The Buddhist path is a means of “fully realizing both authentic being-for-oneself and authentic being-for-others.”¹⁶ Anxiety regarding our inescapable emptiness and aloneness can cause us to flee from our “existential responsibility”¹⁷ into the comfort and security of belief. But this is not the goal of Buddhism. According to Batchelor “the essence of Buddhist faith resides in an ontological commitment that is prior to all articulate formulations.”¹⁸

In The Faith to Doubt Batchelor again raises the issues of institutionalization and existential confrontation in the context of describing his disillusionment with Tibetan Buddhism and his discovery of Zen. He claims that the institutionalization of Buddhism has encouraged practitioners to look upon Buddhist doctrine with certainty; yet this undermines the entire Buddhist project of impermanence and doubt. Whereas clinging to belief provides a false sense of security through stagnation, confronting and accepting our doubt and uncertainty replenishes the momentariness of existence, the beauty of mortality, and the wonder of our surroundings. It also allows us to feel a sense of

¹⁴ Batchelor, Alone With Others 41.

¹⁵ Batchelor, Alone With Others 41 - 42.

¹⁶ Batchelor, Alone With Others 59.

¹⁷ Batchelor, Alone With Others 62.

¹⁸ Batchelor, Alone With Others 67.

interconnectedness and compassion, as well as a sense of the responsibility we share for all other beings.¹⁹

To doubt does not mean to be indecisive; “it means to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our life, to acknowledge that fundamentally we do not know what is going on, to question whatever arises.”²⁰ Contrary to our instinctual perceptions regarding doubt, Batchelor claims that *doubting requires faith* – not the type of faith in which one submits to an authority, but rather faith in one’s strength to surrender to the truth about one’s self. Similarly, Batchelor distinguishes between unknowing and ignorance. To be in a state of unknowing, says Batchelor, is to maintain an openness to the mysteries of life. Ignorance, on the other hand, involves grasping and clinging as well as both the absence and distortion of knowledge.²¹ Again Batchelor is encouraging practitioners to abandon security for the challenging expansiveness of existence.

In Buddhism Without Beliefs Batchelor’s call for doubt and uncertainty becomes a full-fledged assault on beliefs. It is in this book that Batchelor states explicitly his vision of agnostic Buddhism. Following from his previous texts, Batchelor asserts that Buddhism is not something to believe in but something to act upon.²² He claims that the Buddha was not a mystical figure but a healer who taught the way to confront and act upon our anguish and suffering. Enlightenment is not a set of ideas and rituals that once acquired and performed will lead to spiritual maturity; rather, it is a process of continual mindfulness, personal confrontation, and compassion that leads gradually to a state of awakening. Batchelor uses the term “awakening” throughout much of his writing,

¹⁹ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 4.

²⁰ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 16.

²¹ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 44.

²² Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 4.

preferring it to the more common usage “enlightenment”, as he feels that it more accurately conveys the experience of spiritual maturity. It also reflects a more accurate translation of the Sanskrit term *bodhi*.

Batchelor advocates a return to what he claims are the historically agnostic roots of Buddhism that were lost through institutionalization.²³ He presents an agnosticism that he asserts is just as challenging as traditional belief systems. To be an agnostic requires an enormous amount of commitment as it forces us to “confront the enormity of having been born”.²⁴ It entails a “passionate recognition” that we don’t know the answers to why we were born or what we are doing on this planet.²⁵ Like Batchelor’s definition of doubt, his definition of agnosticism is not one of indifference; rather, it is a “catalyst for action.”²⁶

The agnosticism advocated by Batchelor impacts enormously on his interpretation of all Buddhist doctrine. For example, he disregards the traditional Buddhist view of rebirth, claiming that the doctrine is simply a by-product of the prevailing Indian worldview during the Buddha’s lifetime. As well, he asserts, “to cling to the idea of rebirth can deaden the questioning [of what it means to be human].”²⁷ Similarly, Batchelor claims that the Buddha, when asked about karma “tended to emphasize its

²³ In the Majjhima-Nikaya in the Pali Canon there is reference to ten metaphysical questions that the Buddha refused to answer. The Buddha states that he does not wish to answer them because they are unnecessary for holy life and are not conducive to developing non-attachment. Proponents of an agnostic Buddhism point to these questions to indicate the historical roots of their position. The ten questions are: 1) Is the world eternal? 2) Is the world not eternal? 3) Is the world finite? 4) Is the world infinite? 5) Is the soul identical to the body? 6) Is the soul not identical to the body? 7) Does the Tathagata exist after death? 8) Does the Tathagata not exist after death? 9) Does the Tathagata both exist and not exist after death? 10) Does the Tathagata neither exist nor not exist after death?

²⁴ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 19.

²⁵ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 19.

²⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 38.

²⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 38.

psychological rather than its cosmological implications.”²⁸ According to Batchelor, the idea of karma alone cannot provide answers to questions regarding the existence of the universe or the origin of our lives. Indeed, according to Batchelor, Buddhist doctrine cannot provide explanations to any scientific questions; it should be concerned solely with existential issues.

The above overview of Batchelor’s philosophy indicates that much of what he espouses is quite controversial. His negation of beliefs and his unconventional stance on matters of karma and rebirth are all targets for criticism from other Buddhists. These specific criticisms are addressed in the following chapter.

²⁸ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 37.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CRITIQUES

The critiques of Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Sangharakshita provide three different perspectives of Batchelor's Buddhism Without Beliefs. All three men are Western Dharma teachers, yet whereas Punnadhammo and Bodhi are part of the Theravadin tradition, Sangharakshita is the founder of a non-sectarian Western Buddhist Order. All three feel that Batchelor has discarded too much tradition, yet the Bhikkhus express more discomfort with this, perhaps due to their orthodox practice. I have chosen these three critiques because they are the strongest voices of opposition to Buddhism Without Beliefs. Despite the fact that they are directed specifically towards only one text of Batchelor's, they also apply to Alone with Others and The Faith to Doubt, as it is in these books that the seeds of Buddhism Without Beliefs are found.

2.1) Bhikkhu Punnadhammo

Bhikkhu Punnadhammo is the resident monk of the Arrow River Community Centre, a Theravadin Buddhist monastery and meditation centre located in Northern Ontario, Canada. He has been a practicing Buddhist since 1979 and was ordained in 1990 into the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah. He lived in Thailand between 1990 and 1995, at which time he returned to Canada to assume responsibilities at the Arrow River Centre.

The primary point of contention directed by Punnadhammo against Buddhism Without Beliefs is that Batchelor places Buddhism into a post-Enlightenment, scientific, Western framework. Punnadhammo concedes that it is necessary to confront the tensions

that exist between pre-modern Asian and contemporary Western values, yet he takes issue with Batchelor's approach to this challenge. Punnadhammo claims that Batchelor is very much a product of the Enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation, and the scientific revolutions, and that he "takes this complex of values as primary."²⁹ Yet according to Punnadhammo it is Western values, not Buddhism, which should be questioned and modified throughout the process of cultural exchange and integration. Punnadhammo expresses shock and dismay that "a Buddhist writer can so readily dismiss the ancient wisdom of tradition and so decisively claim the superiority of modern materialist philosophy."³⁰

Punnadhammo labels Batchelor a scientific materialist. Although he does not explicitly define this term, he implies that a scientific materialist is one who believes only in the concrete, material world, and rejects the possibility of supernatural or metaphysical phenomena. As well, according to Punnadhammo, "any doctrine of materialism must have an implied self-view."³¹ In this respect, he claims that scientific materialism is fundamentally incompatible with the Buddhist doctrine of not-self, and thus it violates and denigrates the Dharma. Punnadhammo also equates agnosticism with materialism since it refuses to accept the validity of doctrine that is beyond rational or scientific explanation or demonstration. Thus, because Batchelor is a self-proclaimed agnostic who questions doctrines of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment, Punnadhammo considers him to be a scientific materialist.

According to Punnadhammo, Batchelor's agnostic and scientific materialist stance has caused him to fundamentally misinterpret the Dharma. Firstly, Punnadhammo

²⁹ Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, <http://www.kalavunka.org/reviews/bwobrevw.htm> 2.

³⁰ Punnadhammo, 6.

claims, “when we set our own reason upon a pedestal and denigrate the enlightenment of the Buddha with our skepticism, we can create our own false Dharma in service to the desires.”³² In other words, humans are pedestalized when only the material world is validated and all things non-scientific questioned. The self becomes of primary importance and all other things are then evaluated only in terms of how useful they are to the self. Punnadhammo claims that too much faith and confidence is placed in human exploration and explanation. Human reason is elevated to an ultimate status at the expense of supernatural forces or imaginings.

Punnadhammo asserts that Batchelor’s perspective on rebirth illustrates this pedestalization of the self and denigration of the Dharma. In stating that the Buddha’s teaching of rebirth was simply a product of the Indian worldview during the time in which he lived, Punnadhammo claims that Batchelor asserts “the modern materialist worldview is superior to the metaphysical understanding of ancient India.”³³ According to Punnadhammo, this is a trivialization and a dismissal of both the importance of the doctrine of rebirth and the intelligence of the Buddha. Other aspects of the Indian worldview, such as the caste system and the belief in ātman, were challenged by the Buddha; thus, there is no reason to believe that he did not give serious thought to the issue of rebirth. According to Punnadhammo, to claim that he did not take seriously the doctrine of rebirth is “a trivialization of the Buddha’s enlightenment.”³⁴ To be a Buddhist means to have faith in the intelligence and the powers of the Buddha and the teachings that he espoused.

³¹ Punnadhammo, 3.

³² Punnadhammo, 3.

³³ Punnadhammo, 2.

³⁴ Punnadhammo, 2.

Another consequence of the rejection of rebirth, according to Punnadhammo, is that it entails a partial rejection of Buddhist ethics. The Buddha taught the doctrines of karma and rebirth largely so that our actions would have consequences within and beyond this world and thus create incentive for ethical action. If, like Batchelor, “one bases one’s view on materialist assumptions of annihilation after death, where is the motivation to wrestle with the profoundest issues?”³⁵ According to Batchelor’s model, says Punnadhammo, not only does ethical action become irrelevant, so does general Dharma practice. Nirvana, the ceasing of the rounds of rebirth and the goal of Buddhist practice, becomes irrelevant. Not only are doctrines of karma and rebirth being dismissed, but so is enlightenment, the very crux of Buddhist practice. According to Punnadhammo, “what is most unfortunate about the materialist view is that it precludes any possibility of enlightenment.”³⁶ By negating the mystical powers of the Buddha, Punnadhammo feels that Batchelor has degraded enlightenment into something “mundane” and this-worldly.

It is clear that Punnadhammo is alarmed by the prospect of the Dharma being re-interpreted to the point of obliteration. Punnadhammo claims, “while it is true that the Buddha exhorted us not to cling to any views, including those of his teaching, and to investigate reality for ourselves, these directives are not by any means the whole of his teaching.”³⁷ Punnadhammo feels that although Batchelor is trying to make the Dharma relevant to modern Westerners, the entire endeavor can quickly become irrelevant if re-interpreted to the point of obscurity. It would be tragic if this were to happen, says Punnadhammo, for “it is precisely the ancient wisdom of Buddhism that is missing from

³⁵ Punnadhammo, 4.

³⁶ Punnadhammo, 5.

the Western world”³⁸. These ancient teachings must be respected, rather than corrupted by the “arrogant pride of modern times.”³⁹ Instead of one-sidedly critiquing only Buddhism, says Punnadhammo, Batchelor should devote some of his energies to examining and critiquing the Western tradition from which he emerged.

2.2) Bhikkhu Bodhi

Like Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi is also a spiritual leader in the Theravadin community. Born in New York in 1944, Bodhi received a B.A. in philosophy from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Claremont Graduate School. He was ordained in Sri Lanka in 1972. He is the author, editor and translator of many books on Theravada Buddhism, his most recent two being The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (1995) and The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (2000).

Perhaps because he comes from the same school of Buddhism as Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi directs similar criticisms at Buddhism Without Beliefs. Like Punnadhammo, Bodhi feels that Batchelor is compromising the Dharma for the sake of upholding Western secular values. While Bodhi states that Batchelor’s book is an “eloquent attempt to articulate the premise of the emerging secular Buddhism”⁴⁰, he feels that Batchelor has discarded too much tradition in his attempt to “make the Dharma viable in our present sceptical age.”⁴¹

³⁷ Punnadhammo, 3.

³⁸ Punnadhammo, 6.

³⁹ Punnadhammo, 6.

⁴⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi, <http://jbe.la.psu.edu/5/batch1.htm> 2.

⁴¹ Bodhi, 2.

Bodhi admits that he approaches Batchelor's book from an orthodox perspective. In discussing Batchelor's view that mindfulness practice initiates a radical questioning of all aspects of life, Bodhi states: "For one like myself, nurtured on the Pali texts, this seems a bizarre conception of 'Dharma practice'."⁴² According to Bodhi, the Buddha taught that "insight meditation leads to direct knowledge of the true nature of things"⁴³, rather than to incessant questioning and doubt. Bodhi also takes issue with Batchelor's obvious bias against Buddhist orthodoxy. While Bodhi concedes that "orthodoxy and creativity have had an uneasy relationship" he claims that "[Batchelor is] viewing Buddhist orthodoxy as a mirror image of Western faiths".⁴⁴ Orthodoxy, according to Bodhi, is not incompatible with creativity and contemplation, and it has done much to encourage, rather than to suppress, the Dharma. According to Bodhi, "when the secular presuppositions of modernity clash with the basic principles of Right Understanding stressed by the Buddha, there is no question which of the two must be abandoned."⁴⁵ He feels that Batchelor chooses in favor of secular values, and the result of such concessions is that Buddhism is deteriorating into "psychologically oriented humanism"⁴⁶ rather than strengthening its position as an ancient tradition with beliefs and rituals.

As well as finding fault with Batchelor's disregard of tradition, Bodhi is also critical of Batchelor's rejection of belief. Whereas Batchelor asserts that the Four Noble Truths are not statements to believe in but injunctions to act upon, Bodhi claims, "in order to act upon the truths, one has to believe them."⁴⁷ While this argument could be made

⁴² Bodhi, 4.

⁴³ Bodhi, 4.

⁴⁴ Bodhi, 5.

⁴⁵ Bodhi, 5.

⁴⁶ Bodhi, 5.

⁴⁷ Bodhi, 3.

regarding any set of actions, Bodhi feels they hold particular truth for the Four Noble Truths because “the tasks imposed by the truths acquire their meaning from a specific context, namely, the quest for liberation and the vicious rounds of rebirth.”⁴⁸ In other words, Bodhi claims that if one denies both the samsara of rebirth as well as the nirvana of enlightenment then the Four Noble Truths bear no meaning. What is the point of acting upon something that is meaningless? In order for our actions to effect change either within oneself or in the world, they must possess meaning that is gained only from context and belief. According to Bodhi, “*dukkha* really means the suffering of repeated becoming in the round of rebirths; thus, once one dismisses the idea of rebirth, the Four Noble Truths lose their depth and scope.”⁴⁹

Bodhi directs a similar criticism towards Batchelor’s agnosticism. He states, “to subject [Buddhist doctrine] to an insistent agnostic questioning, as Batchelor proposes, is to derail one’s practice from the start.”⁵⁰ Bodhi explains that the Buddha taught an Eightfold Path that begins with right view and ends with right meditation. Only once these stages have been passed through are they no longer useful. Their inherent emptiness, while perhaps understood intellectually from the start, cannot be used as an excuse to remain on the shore.⁵¹ Bodhi asserts that beginning the path with an attitude of questioning, and as such disregarding the principles that make up the path, is to abandon the raft before one has even set foot in the water. Both shores appear similar yet there is a whole ocean separating the perspectives of one who is beginning and one who is

⁴⁸ Bodhi, 3.

⁴⁹ Bodhi, 3.

⁵⁰ Bodhi, 4.

⁵¹ The metaphor of the raft is commonly used to explain the passage from samsara to nirvana. The Dharma is like a raft that helps one through the choppy waters of life. Once the opposite shore is reached, the raft (i.e. the Dharma) is discarded.

completing the path. One cannot simply remain on the comfort of the first shore and claim to have reached the other side. There must be movement, and a path to lead one through that movement. Bodhi claims that Batchelor, with his call for the incessant questioning of Buddhist principles, is doing a disservice to practitioners who wish to make progress on the path to enlightenment. Moreover, he claims that Batchelor's agnosticism dismisses entirely the possibility of enlightenment, and "nullifies its lacerative power."⁵² As such, the possibility of overcoming the confusion and suffering that is so prevalent in contemporary Western societies is jeopardized. Bodhi claims, "today a vast cloud of moral and spiritual confusion hangs over humankind, and Batchelor's agnostic Dharma practice seems to me a very weak antidote indeed."⁵³

As well as dismissing enlightenment, Bodhi also claims that Batchelor's agnosticism dismisses ethics. Bodhi states, "Batchelor makes no mention of any code of moral rules, not even the Five Precepts"⁵⁴ and although he discusses moral integrity "it remains questionable to me whether this alone, without concrete guidelines, is a sufficient basis for ethics."⁵⁵ In other words, Bodhi feels that Batchelor's emphasis on existentialism and personal responsibility is not as effective as concrete ethical rules. According to him, moral behavior does not simply arise spontaneously; a society that desires order and peace requires guidelines.

⁵² Bodhi, 3.

⁵³ Bodhi, 5.

⁵⁴ Bodhi, 4.

⁵⁵ Bodhi, 5.

2.3) Urgyen Sangharakshita

Urgyen Sangharakshita⁵⁶ was one of the first people to introduce Buddhism to the West, and he has devoted much of his life to the integration of Buddhism into the contemporary Western world. Born in London, England in 1925 as Dennis Lingwood, Sangharakshita became interested in Buddhism as a teenager. In 1943 he traveled to Asia as a member of the British army, and in 1945, after leaving the army, he traveled throughout India as an ascetic. He was ordained as a novice monk in the Theravadin tradition in 1949 and between 1949 and 1964 he studied with both Theravadin and Tibetan teachers, and worked with Ambedkar to integrate Buddhism back into Indian culture. Sangharakshita returned to England in 1964 and three years later formed a modern Western Buddhist community called the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) and the Western Buddhist Order (WBO) for ordained members. The mandate of the WBO, still a thriving force in present-day Western Buddhism, is to modify traditional Buddhist structures to suit modern needs. As such, it is a non-sectarian community of lay practitioners in which members are fully integrated into society. Ordination is obtained by making the conscious and committed decision to go for refuge. The WBO has centres throughout England and North America, as well as a number of Right Livelihood businesses that are employed by WBO and FWBO members. Sangharakshita is also the author of more than forty books on Buddhism.

Sangharakshita's twenty-page review of Buddhism Without Beliefs contains many positive comments as well as many criticisms. Unlike Bhikkhus Punnadhammo and

⁵⁶ Much of this bibliographical information is taken from the FWBO website (www.fwbo.org) as well as Batchelor's Awakening of the West, chapter 19.

Bodhi, Sangharakshita emerged from, but is no longer part of, an orthodox Buddhist tradition. Perhaps the conciliatory tone of much of his review is due to this fact. Like Batchelor, Sangharakshita's life goal has been to create a viable Dharma in the Western world. However, while both men share this common goal they have somewhat different ideas about how it should be achieved.⁵⁷

Sangharakshita writes that his "principal disagreement with Batchelor is in connection with his advocacy of a belief-free, agnostic Buddhism."⁵⁸ He claims that although Batchelor is correct in seeking answers to certain cosmological questions in the appropriate domains (i.e. science), "this is too sweeping, for we must be open to the possibility of there being phenomena which are inexplicable in scientific terms."⁵⁹ In other words, he claims that there are limits to the capacity of human reason, especially regarding questions about the Dharma. According to Sangharakshita, the Dharma is beyond reason or logic and thus it is not only fruitless but also disrespectful to seek explanations for metaphysical phenomena in the scientific realm. For example, whereas questions regarding the origins of the universe may be answered by science, questions about karma or rebirth should remain in the domain of religion.

Sangharakshita states, with regard to Batchelor's stance on belief, "believing in a proposition of fact is not incompatible with acting upon it."⁶⁰ According to Sangharakshita, belief is necessary in order for action to even exist; the two are not mutually exclusive. As well, belief is necessary in order to distinguish Buddhism from other religions. Sangharakshita asserts that members of all religions are taught to act in a

⁵⁷ While it would be interesting to examine the areas on which the two men agree, due to space constraints the discussion will remain focused on Sangharakshita's critiques of Batchelor's philosophy.

⁵⁸ Ugyen Sangharakshita, <http://buddhismtoday.com/english/book/022-belief2/htm> 7.

⁵⁹ Sangharakshita, 11.

compassionate and empathetic manner, and thus it is difficult to assess to what religion people belong only from their actions. According to Sangharakshita, it is really people's beliefs that distinguish them as being from one religious tradition or another.

In light of the above benefits of beliefs, Sangharakshita proposes his own suggestion – that of *provisional* beliefs. With this suggestion he is in effect trying to insert a gray area into Batchelor's black and white distinctions between belief and non-belief. Sangharakshita compares provisional beliefs to going on a journey without knowing for certain that the route we have taken is correct. It is only once we arrive at our destination that our intuition and provisional beliefs become concrete knowledge. Similarly, "actual knowledge of the four truths comes only with the attainment of the Transcendent Path."⁶¹ According to Sangharakshita, our experience of the path and its transformative effects confirm our provisional beliefs in enlightenment, nirvana, or mature spiritual development. We thus move from a position of ignorance or scepticism to one of actual experiential knowledge. Yet the only way to attain the goals of the path and this experiential knowledge, says Sangharakshita, is to believe, at least believe provisionally, in the path. To do otherwise is, as Bodhi agrees, to abandon the raft before we have even stepped in the water.

In a further criticism, Sangharakshita states that Batchelor's emphasis on action to the exclusion of belief is a type of authoritarianism. He claims that Batchelor is negating the possibility of a graduated path by advising practitioners to simply act, without really examining what they are acting upon. Sangharakshita likens this to the story of Alice in Wonderland in which Alice is confronted with a bottle that simply says "Drink me" on

⁶⁰ Sangharakshita, 13.

⁶¹ Sangharakshita, 14.

the label. Similarly, says Sangharakshita, Batchelor is advising practitioners to “Just act”. The graduated path of learning and believing followed by acting does not fit into this model. Ironically, Sangharakshita sees Batchelor returning to a model of the Tibetan-inspired instantaneous path of which he is extremely critical. Whereas Batchelor feels that in the Tibetan model of mind-to-mind transmission and instant enlightenment there is no room for questioning, Sangharakshita feels that in Batchelor’s model of action there is no room for believing.

Like Punnadhammo and Bodhi, Sangharakshita feels that Batchelor’s brand of agnostic Buddhism precludes the possibility of enlightenment. Although Batchelor focuses on action with the goal of awakening, the type of action which he recommends to practitioners is unfulfilling to Sangharakshita. Batchelor places much emphasis on meditation as both the practice of awareness and self-acceptance. Yet according to Sangharakshita this is only part of the picture; meditation also involves the attainment of higher states of spiritual development. Sangharakshita writes, “In reducing meditation to stopping and paying attention to what is happening in the moment Batchelor is in effect precluding the possibility of Enlightenment.”⁶² Sangharakshita believes that having an attitude of constant self-acceptance does nothing to rid our self of unhealthy mental states. He feels that although we must be aware of our mental states, we must also take measures to change those that are unskillful. According to Sangharakshita, “Dharma practice involves not a weak, and probably indulgent ‘self-acceptance’, but an unflinching self-knowledge that recognizes both one’s strengths and one’s weaknesses.”⁶³

⁶² Sangharakshita, 9.

⁶³ Sangharakshita, 10.

Sangharakshita also takes issue with what he interprets as Batchelor's "materialism". According to Sangharakshita (as well as Punnadhammo and Bodhi), because Batchelor feels that "consciousness can be explained in terms of brain function"⁶⁴, he is a materialist who is subsuming Buddhism under the broad umbrella of science. If this is indeed the case then existential experience is "the concern of science rather than religion and there is nothing left for Dharma practice to concern itself with."⁶⁵ In other words, materialism renders unnecessary the entire enterprise of Dharma practice, or even religion for that matter. Like the two other critics, Sangharakshita is troubled by the prospect of Buddhism becoming irrelevant.

The critiques outlined above – the primary areas of contention being Batchelor's stance on belief, his pedestalization of human reason, and his rejection of Buddhist ethics – all stem from a fear of the Buddhist tradition being discarded. There is an assumption that change of the magnitude of which Batchelor is proposing is damaging to the core of Buddhism. Whether or not these fears are founded and the critiques justified will be examined throughout the remainder of the paper.

⁶⁴ Sangharakshita, 8.

⁶⁵ Sangharakshita, 8.

CHAPTER THREE: BATCHELOR'S PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT

The goal of this chapter is to outline Batchelor's philosophical vision in response to the criticisms against his philosophy. Issues examined include his stance on belief, his position on the doctrines of karma, rebirth, and enlightenment, and the details of his agnostic vision. In order to gain a sense of his overall philosophical stance, all three of Batchelor's main philosophical texts are utilized.

3.1) Batchelor's Stance on Belief

In Alone With Others Batchelor presents his vision of a Buddhism that is not weighed down by structure, but fully rooted in existential being and action. In discussing how modern society has become obsessed with the idea of "having" and "possessing", Batchelor states, "authentic religious consciousness is not another extension of the horizontal dimension of having, but an awakening to the presence of the vertical dimension of being."⁶⁶ According to Batchelor, the way to make religion part of one's very being, rather than simply one more thing to acquire, is to de-emphasize doctrines and beliefs. The essence or heart of a religion is not found in dogma; it is found in the living tradition and actions of its practitioners. Batchelor writes, "All religious institutions and their accompanying belief systems are culturally and historically conditioned phenomena which point beyond themselves to man's ultimate concern. They

⁶⁶ Batchelor, Alone With Others 26.

themselves are never worthy of such concern.”⁶⁷ He understands beliefs as tools that help practitioners reach the existential essence of a religion. To mistake these tools for the religion itself is to turn religion into a possession. Batchelor states, “the true value of any dogma or belief lies in its ability to point beyond itself to a deeper reality.”⁶⁸

In Alone With Others Batchelor is primarily concerned with the existential aspects of Buddhism. He warns against raising the conceptual and structural framework of the religion to ultimacy⁶⁹ while forgetting its purpose in proposing answers to existential questions such as “What is life?” or “What is the meaning and purpose of life in the light of inevitable death?”⁷⁰ According to Batchelor, these existential questions require relevant existential answers that are capable of addressing the concerns of modern-day Western practitioners. Batchelor states, “it is no solution to naively adopt a belief-structure which was formulated for a different time.”⁷¹ The challenge of contemporary Buddhism is thus to reformulate ancient Buddhist beliefs and insights in such a way that makes them relevant to modern practitioners. He believes that the way to achieve this is to relinquish our attachment to any one form of Buddhism, and to understand that “no particular interpretation or expression of Buddhism can ever be final.”⁷² To cling to a particular form of Buddhism with the mistaken perception that it is permanent is to evade our existential responsibility and to refuse to face our anxieties about life. According to Batchelor the reality of our life is that we were born alone and we will die alone; no amount of clinging to belief will provide security from this reality.

⁶⁷ Batchelor, Alone With Others 29-30.

⁶⁸ Batchelor, Alone With Others 41.

⁶⁹ Batchelor, Alone With Others 41.

⁷⁰ Batchelor, Alone With Others 40.

⁷¹ Batchelor, Alone With Others 43.

⁷² Batchelor, Alone With Others 52.

Batchelor's advocacy of a belief-free Buddhism gains further momentum in The Faith to Doubt. In this text Batchelor claims that by clinging to beliefs we are not only evading our existential responsibility but we are denying the goal of the Buddhist path. According to Batchelor, the goal of the Buddhist path is to be constantly challenged by the impermanence of life and the questions at the heart of existence. The goal of the path is to doubt. However, "belief, whether in a teacher, a doctrine, or even one's own experience, retreats from the questions behind a shield of protective views and concepts."⁷³ According to Batchelor, beliefs allow our existential questions to remain shielded from the surface of our consciousness.

Batchelor does not define doubt in the traditional sense of "wavering indecision". His interpretation of doubt means "to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our lives, to acknowledge that fundamentally we do not know what is going on."⁷⁴ Similarly, doubt does not mean uncertainty or ignorance; it means to maintain a meditative attitude that allows us to constantly be aware of, and to question, our mental processes and our environment. For Batchelor, it also means to be constantly aware of the interconnectedness at the heart of existence.

According to Batchelor, this experience of doubt is intricately linked with faith. Batchelor draws upon the Zen tradition in which the three factors to obtaining enlightenment are great faith, great doubt, and great courage. He explains the connection of these concepts in the following manner:

The acceptance of such doubt [keeping alive the perplexity of our lives] as basic to Buddhist practice qualifies the meaning of faith. Faith is not equivalent to mere

⁷³ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 3.

⁷⁴ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 17.

belief. Faith is the condition of ultimate confidence that we have the capacity to follow the path of doubt to its end.”⁷⁵

This statement suggests that to have faith is to allow our self to let go – to surrender to our own abilities and power instead of submitting to belief. When we let go of the beliefs and structures that block us from ourselves we obtain the faith to ride the waves of our lives. The raft is there to rely upon, but it is just that – a raft. Buddhist practices, beliefs, and rituals are not cruise boats that prevent us from getting sea-sick; ultimately we must experience some nausea and discomfort and maintain faith that the choppy tides and our own abilities will eventually lead us to shore.

As the title suggests, Buddhism Without Beliefs is a full-fledged critique of rigid belief structures. Batchelor states that not only are the Four Noble Truths injunctions to act rather than statements to believe, but that “understanding anguish [the first Noble Truth] leads to letting go of craving, which leads to realizing its cessation, which leads to cultivating the path.”⁷⁶ However, we only experience anguish acutely when we break free from our habitual routines and patterns and when we “witness ourselves hovering between birth and death.”⁷⁷ According to Batchelor, this state of change and challenge cannot be attained through the adoption of a belief system. One cannot simply believe in anguish – one has to experience anguish in order to learn from it fully. Looking to belief for consolation prevents one from experiencing the first Noble Truth, and this derails the entire rest of the path. As in his previous texts, Batchelor reiterates that Buddhist beliefs and doctrines are not meant to be adopted for security. According to Batchelor,

⁷⁵ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 17.

⁷⁶ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 11.

⁷⁷ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 22.

“perplexed questioning is the central path itself...Perplexity keeps awareness on its toes.”⁷⁸

Batchelor claims that being open to perplexity, rather than closed off in rigid belief structures, is also essential for ethics. It is only in moments of complete openness that “the barrier of self is lifted and individual existence is surrendered to the well-being of existence as a whole.”⁷⁹ When these barriers that protect the self are lifted, says Batchelor, one is able to experience inter-connectedness and compassion. Batchelor claims that beliefs are defense mechanisms that provide us with a superficial sense of identity and self-worth, yet they also serve to keep us separate and divided. For example, a belief in racial divisions may provide a sense of identity and security, yet it cuts us off from the essential humanity of all sentient beings.

3.2) The Doctrines of Karma, Rebirth, and Enlightenment

There are enormous implications to Batchelor’s stance on belief. Because Batchelor is more concerned with action than with belief, he claims, “there is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about the path. It encompasses everything we do.”⁸⁰ As a result, many of the religious aspects of Buddhism are de-emphasized by Batchelor and many traditional Buddhist doctrines, such as karma, rebirth and enlightenment, come under scrutiny. Batchelor regards them as peripheral to the real heart of the tradition.

⁷⁸ Batchelor, *Faith to Doubt* 98.

⁷⁹ Batchelor, *Faith to Doubt* 90.

⁸⁰ Batchelor, *Faith to Doubt* 10.

Batchelor interprets the doctrines of karma and rebirth as worldviews that provide “consoling assurances of a better afterlife.”⁸¹ Like Prince Siddhartha living in his comfortable palace, so too do consoling beliefs keep us placated and secure. They prevent us from facing the existential questions of birth and death, such as “Since death alone is certain and the time of death uncertain, what should I do?”⁸² Contemplating such questions and experiencing their accompanying emotions encourages an appreciation for the beauty of mortality and the precariousness of existence.

In negating the religious and cosmological aspects of rebirth, Batchelor also negates karma. The doctrine of karma traditionally means the doctrine of cause and effect. Actions, both good and bad, create positive or negative effects both in this lifetime and the next. According to Batchelor, the Buddha, “when questioned on the issue [of karma] tended to emphasize its psychological rather than its cosmological implications.”⁸³ Thus, Batchelor believes that karma alone cannot be relied upon to explain the origins of the universe or of our lives. According to Batchelor, karma means simply psychological or ethical “intention”, and far from being a cosmological force, it is apparent in our daily lives through behavioral patterns. For example, when we approach a task with positive intentions we usually see the effects of those good intentions in its completion. This is quite different from conventional perspectives of karma which state that karma not only affects our mental processes, but also the entire goings-on of the universe. For example, it is traditionally assumed that unethical actions in this lifetime will lead to an undesirable rebirth. Yet Batchelor negates the cosmological suggestion

⁸¹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 114.

⁸² Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 29.

⁸³ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 37.

that our actions in one lifetime impact on the quality of our rebirth. He states, “the mere fact of rebirth would not entail any ethical linkage between one existence and the next.”⁸⁴

Not surprisingly, Batchelor’s stance on rebirth is also unconventional. He advocates a third option beyond merely condoning or condemning rebirth – that of “I don’t know”. Batchelor claims, “to cling to the idea of rebirth can deaden the questioning [of what it means to be human].”⁸⁵ When the doctrine of rebirth is interpreted literally, the unknown is replaced by images of heaven or hell. He says that we might imagine lush pastures, white clouds, or caves full of ghosts. These images provide answers, regardless of whether they create a sense of security or fear. It is these answers that prevent the process of questioning from coming to fruition.

Batchelor asserts that an attitude of “I don’t know” is quite different from an attitude of “I don’t care”. On the contrary, Batchelor feels that adopting an attitude of “I don’t know” means that one cares very deeply and wants to keep being challenged. As well, it allows one to remain in the present, focused on current emotions and challenges. According to Batchelor, “it [an agnostic attitude] demands an ethics of empathy rather than a metaphysics of fear and hope.”⁸⁶ In other words, letting go of beliefs enables one to be present, mindful, and focused on ethical action.

Batchelor advocates a metaphorical, rather than a literal, understanding of rebirth. He asserts, “regardless of what we believe, our actions will reverberate beyond our deaths.”⁸⁷ During our lifetime we inevitably impact on those around us; this affects the

⁸⁴ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 37.

⁸⁵ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 38.

⁸⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 38.

⁸⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 38.

world to some degree, whether large or small. Our legacy continues, regardless of cosmological developments, through this endless domino effect of influence.

Enlightenment is also painted by Batchelor in psychological and metaphorical terms. Batchelor's discomfort with the post-Enlightenment interpretation of *bodhi* as enlightenment is apparent in his use of the traditional Asian word "awakening". Whereas the term "enlightenment" implies a radical transformation, the term "awakening" indicates a more gradual shift in mindset. According to Batchelor, "the Buddha was not a mystic. His awakening was not a shattering insight into a transcendent Truth...In describing to the five ascetics what his awakening meant, he spoke of having discovered complete freedom of heart and mind from the compulsions of craving."⁸⁸ Batchelor claims that only after Buddhism became institutionalized did the Buddha's awakening become magnified into a transcendent and mystical event. Batchelor maintains that the Buddha was simply a healer who had overcome existential confusion⁸⁹ and that the path he taught was not intensely radical or structured. As Batchelor says, "awakening cannot be systematically cranked out as though it were the end-result of a technical procedure."⁹⁰

Just as metaphorical or psychological interpretations of karma and rebirth bring these concepts down to earth, so does Batchelor's interpretation of awakening make the gaining of insight more accessible. According to Batchelor, as Buddhism became increasingly institutionalized its concept of *bodhi* became more exalted and as a result more inaccessible.⁹¹ Batchelor explains that awakening is both close by and far away; it is occurring within us at this present moment, yet it also requires effort. This is the

⁸⁸ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 5.

⁸⁹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 5-6.

⁹⁰ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 84.

⁹¹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 12.

paradox that must be faced if the complexity of awakening is to be realized. When awakening is only regarded as a distant possibility the focus shifts away from our selves. Yet focusing on the humanity of the Buddha allows us to realize the capacity for insight and goodness within our own selves. According to Batchelor, when we deify the Buddha and focus only on the prospect of afterlife salvation, “all we are really doing is repeating the same inauthentic processes of flight from ourselves and absorption in a world of particular entities.”⁹² However, when we remain mindful of our selves in the present we become aware of our own Buddha-nature.⁹³

3.3) Batchelor's Agnosticism

Batchelor's critique of beliefs and his re-interpretations of key Buddhist doctrines are all products of his overarching agnostic framework. It is important to note that for Batchelor the mere absence of belief does not automatically entail agnosticism; rather, non-belief is a vital by-product of an agnostic perspective. The indifference or ambivalence that often accompanies non-belief is the opposite of the committed attitude that accompanies Batchelor's particular interpretation of agnosticism.

The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines agnosticism as “the view that human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist.” Agnosticism is “scepticism with respect to the existence or nonexistence of a supernatural divine being.”⁹⁴ This

⁹² Batchelor, *Alone With Others* 122.

⁹³ Batchelor, *Faith to Doubt* 78.

⁹⁴ Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. CD-ROM Version 1.0. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) “Agnosticism”.

definition emphasizes the theistically sceptical aspects of agnosticism, whereas Batchelor's definition is considerably more layered and complex. Batchelor's agnosticism is an entire vision and way of seeing life. It not only expresses uncertainty with regard to the supernatural or metaphysical, but also focuses on the benefits of an existential interpretation of religion and of life.

Batchelor claims that historically Buddhist philosophy was agnostic because the Buddha refused to provide definitive answers to metaphysical questions⁹⁵, saying that he taught only anguish and the ending of anguish. The Buddha, according to Batchelor, claimed that the Dharma was about freedom and that "people should be responsible for their own freedom."⁹⁶ Yet Batchelor asserts that this historically agnostic perspective dissipated as Buddhism became increasingly institutionalized. He advocates a return to these historical roots that were lost due to an increasing focus on religion, ritual, devotion, and belief.

In the modern West agnosticism is often confused with atheism or attitudes of general indifference. However, just as Batchelor advocates a return to the roots of Buddhism, he also advocates a return to the original usage of the term "agnosticism", coined by T.H. Huxley in 1869. Batchelor claims that for Huxley "agnosticism was as demanding as any moral, philosophical, or religious creed."⁹⁷ Agnosticism is a method that allows for the exercising of reason just as the Dharma is a method and a practice that leads to awakening. According to Batchelor, "the Buddha followed his reason as far as it would take him and did not pretend that any conclusion was certain unless it was

⁹⁵ See footnote 23 for a discussion of the unanswered metaphysical questions.

⁹⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 15.

⁹⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 17.

demonstrable.”⁹⁸ However, the focus on reason does not mean that there is no aspect of faith. On the contrary, Batchelor’s vision is one of a “deep” agnosticism that not only encompasses faith but entails a fundamental respect for phenomena beyond our realm of rational knowing.

Following Huxley’s lead, Batchelor defines agnosticism literally as *a-gnosis*, “gnosis in the sense that these traditions claimed that they have some kind of privileged knowledge.”⁹⁹ In other words, agnosticism is not about gaining concrete knowledge; rather it is “founded on a passionate recognition that *I do not know*. It confronts the enormity of having been born instead of reaching for the consolation of belief.”¹⁰⁰ According to Batchelor, this is achieved through constant and committed mindful awareness that leads to an examination of all areas of one’s life. Uncertainty allows one to focus on the present moment, and it allows the mysteries of life, and the freedom of all things, to open to us. Deep agnosticism entails deep caring, deep experiencing and deep awareness.

The element of faith present in Batchelor’s agnosticism is clearly emphasized in The Faith to Doubt. In this book, Batchelor’s usage of the word doubt is similar to his usage of the word agnosticism in Buddhism Without Beliefs. Doubt is defined, like agnosticism, as “a state of existential perplexity”¹⁰¹ or unknowing. The *faith* to doubt is the faith to remain open to, and to learn from, this type of perplexity rather than shutting it out from fear. It is the faith that being open to all experience and possibilities will lead eventually to insight. According to Batchelor, “this existential perplexity is the very

⁹⁸ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 18.

⁹⁹ Batchelor, “Deep Agnosticism” 178.

¹⁰⁰ Batchelor, “Deep Agnosticism” 19.

¹⁰¹ Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 16.

place within us where awakening is the closest. To deny it and adopt a comforting set of beliefs is to renounce the very impulse that keeps one on track.”¹⁰²

The seeds of an agnostic position are found in Batchelor’s philosophical writing even before The Faith to Doubt. In Alone With Others the emphasis on existential investigation has direct agnostic implications. Here Batchelor encourages practitioners to locate their own answers to existential questions rather than look to doctrine for concrete solutions. Although he does not explicitly say the words “I don’t know” as in Buddhism Without Beliefs, the implication is that remaining open to all possibilities is the way to reincorporate Buddhism into the dimension of being rather than of having or possessing. In a style very similar to his later texts, Batchelor states, “the gradual extrapolation of these primarily existential concerns into a religious form, composed of mainly metaphysical concepts, had the ironic consequence of producing a greater sense of alienation between the Buddhist and the Buddha.”¹⁰³ His goal is thus to keep these existential issues grounded in the self rather than concretized in religious structure; the way to accomplish this is to discard belief and adopt an attitude of unknowing.

Batchelor’s agnosticism is not necessarily a type of scepticism. Although his definition of agnosticism is similar to that of doubt, it is not similar to that of scepticism. According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, scepticism is “the view that we fail to know anything” and that “we are *unable* to attain knowledge.”¹⁰⁴ According to the sceptic tradition, all the possible evidence we have for knowing things is fallible, and thus it is impossible to gain knowledge of any sort. If it is impossible to trust any evidence,

¹⁰² Batchelor, Faith to Doubt 16.

¹⁰³ Batchelor, Alone With Others 49.

¹⁰⁴ Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. CD-ROM Version 1.0. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) “Scepticism”.

then it is impossible to definitively know anything. The sceptic is not only uncertain but claims that knowledge is unattainable. Scepticism is generally regarded as a rational philosophy¹⁰⁵, for if everything is examined through rigorous tests of reason, it is impossible to attain any logical certainty. Batchelor not only regards scepticism as rigorous rationality, but he also compares it with “a cynicism that we find so much of in the world today.”¹⁰⁶

Unlike scepticism, Batchelor’s agnosticism does not claim that all knowledge is unattainable, only that *we cannot know fully the answers to certain questions*. According to Batchelor, “an agnostic Buddhist would seek knowledge in the appropriate domains: astrophysics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, etc.”¹⁰⁷ While Batchelor places emphasis on rational enquiry and claims that we cannot fully know certain things, this sentiment comes more from a sense of respect for the metaphysical rather than from its dismissal. Batchelor writes, “an agnostic Buddhist eschews atheism as much as theism, and is as reluctant to regard the universe as devoid of meaning as endowed with meaning.”¹⁰⁸ Asserting this type of unknowing is quite different from abandoning epistemological principles and claiming a definitive “no” in response to questions regarding knowledge.

Batchelor feels that “agnosticism has tended to lose its confidence and lapse into scepticism.”¹⁰⁹ He calls for a return to the agnostic dimensions of Buddhism, as he feels that agnosticism has the power to help create vibrant Buddhist communities. Although

¹⁰⁵ Although Nicholas Rescher in his book Scepticism (London: Oxford, 1980, p. 201) claims, “in refusing to undertake cognitive commitments, the sceptic would have us withdraw from the enterprise of rationality as well.” In other words, he claims that the sceptic only *seems* to be using rational arguments, but the rejection of epistemological principles also entails the rejection of reason.

¹⁰⁶ Batchelor, “Deep Agnosticism” 181.

¹⁰⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 18.

¹⁰⁸ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 19.

Batchelor concedes that the Buddhist institutions that presently make up a large portion of the Western Buddhist landscape provide excellent resources and training, he feels they are ill-equipped to create a “contemporary culture of awakening.”¹¹⁰ Rather, Batchelor envisions communities in which practitioners support each other through existential concerns. He claims that “the democratic and agnostic imperatives of the secular world demand not another Buddhist Church, but an individuated community, where creative imagination and social engagement are valued as highly as philosophic reflection and meditative attainment.”¹¹¹

What are the implications of Batchelor’s agnostic position and his rejection of traditional interpretations of Buddhist doctrine? Is he altering Buddhism to the point of obscurity or is he simply getting to the heart of the matter? These questions will be addressed in the remainder of the paper.

¹⁰⁹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 18.

¹¹⁰ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 114.

¹¹¹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 114.

CHAPTER FOUR: BATCHELOR'S CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Batchelor's philosophical project is part of a larger project of cultural translation. What is the role of a cultural translator? In Batchelor's case, I have interpreted it to mean that he attempts to make Buddhism relevant and accessible to a Western secular audience, and to integrate the Dharma into a Western cultural context. That Batchelor aspires to these goals is apparent not only in his personal influences and philosophy, but also in his writing style, his choice of language, and the analogies he uses to convey Buddhist concepts. His role as a cultural translator is also apparent in The Awakening of the West, a discussion of the history of the transmission of Buddhism in the Western world, and in Verses From the Center, a translation of a dense Buddhist text into accessible and poetic English. Yet the accessibility of these texts could also be perceived as a watering-down of Buddhism, or a treading of the contentious line between integration and assimilation.

4.1) Influences on Batchelor's Cultural Translation

Stephen Batchelor's desire for a fluid integration of Buddhism into a Western cultural framework is explained in part by his cultural roots and influences. Batchelor explains his affinity for Western secular culture in terms of a return to the roots of his childhood:

I was brought up outside an explicitly Christian culture...What I reconnected with, therefore, is not what we would call the religious traditions of the West, but rather the humanistic, secular, agnostic culture, which I feel a very, very deep

sympathy with...So in recovering my roots, I'm also recovering, as it were, a nonreligious identity.¹¹²

Batchelor's secular, agnostic upbringing impacted on his view of Buddhism and his desire to formulate a philosophy and a method that makes sense of, and integrates, both worlds. The merging of Buddhism with the tradition of one's upbringing is a common phenomenon in Western Buddhist communities. For example, many Jewish and Christian Buddhists attempt to combine their new religious identity with the traditions, rituals, and beliefs of their childhood. Batchelor states: "I've found that this denial of one's roots, this denial of one's cultural upbringing, is not actually possible to sustain."¹¹³ He claims that even if Buddhism is adopted out of a sense of rebellion, or as an alternative to the perceived oppressiveness of other traditions, one's upbringing undeniably colors one's current involvements and perspectives. According to Batchelor, we are all socialized into a particular way of seeing the world; the numerous influences with which we are raised undeniably imprint on our psyche. The problems faced when adopting a new religion are similar to those faced during historical revolutions. For example, a "purely" capitalist revolution is unattainable in former communist countries, as decades of communist influence cannot be erased overnight. Similarly, a lifetime of cultural influences cannot be negated through the adoption of a new tradition.

Batchelor expresses these ideas further in Alone With Others:

It is simply not possible to uproot ourselves from the soil of Western civilization in which we have grown. No matter how strongly we reject its values, we cannot avoid being a part and product of its development. To turn our attention elsewhere and to absorb ourselves in a foreign religion does not make it go away – it merely relegates it to the shadows.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Batchelor, "Deep Agnosticism" 177.

¹¹³ Batchelor, "Deep Agnosticism" 177.

¹¹⁴ Batchelor, Alone With Others 19.

According to Batchelor, practitioners must *work with*, and learn from, their primary cultural framework rather than repressing it in the hopes of adopting wholeheartedly a new tradition and framework. Batchelor finds it more constructive to acknowledge one's influences and to combine multiple traditions or cultural systems in a viable and beneficial way, than it is to pretend to be starting fresh. By working with multiple frameworks, one's influences are acknowledged and a richer tradition can evolve. For example, many Jews who have adopted Buddhism have found that combining both traditions has enabled them to gain more from each. Many meditate regularly, yet also light Shabbat candles.¹¹⁵ It is only through this type of cultural dialogue, says Batchelor, that a unique and relevant Buddhism will emerge in the Western world.

In this respect, the Buddhism that takes shape in the Western hemisphere will have a unique flavor, just as it does in different countries throughout Asia. According to Batchelor this "mélange" is still Buddhism, just a Buddhism that encompasses new ideas.¹¹⁶ For a religion to remain dynamic it must adapt to its new surroundings, just as for a relationship to remain dynamic it must adapt to the continuously evolving personalities and needs of its partners.

Batchelor's attempt at cultural dialogue hinges on a notion of "relational awareness."¹¹⁷ He claims that no cultural framework is superior or inferior, and none are dualistic. Rather, they simply *relate* to one another in dialogue and in sharing. Ironically, Batchelor states: "I don't actually like the idea of a Western Buddhism. I think it's a

¹¹⁵ For more information on this subject, see Roger Kamenetz. The Jew in the Lotus. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

¹¹⁶ Batchelor, "Deep Agnosticism" 188.

¹¹⁷ Batchelor, "Deep Agnosticism" 187-188.

horrible notion as well as a very outdated notion. It presupposes West / East – again, a standard dualism and one that reflects, in fact, a kind of imperial, colonial bias.”¹¹⁸ He asserts that the Dharma remains dynamic and vibrant when it is in dialogue with its cultural context, whether in Canada, Thailand, or Japan. Yet there is no essential “Western Buddhism” or “Eastern Buddhism”. The Dharma simply is what it is during the time and place in which it exists. For example, when Buddhism first evolved in India, it was not called “Indian Buddhism”; it was simply Buddhism. Similarly, the Buddhism we find throughout the world today is simply Buddhism in interaction with its particular cultural context.

Batchelor concedes that in the process of relational dialogue there is a fine line between integration and assimilation. For example, proponents of a secular Buddhism tend to compare Buddhism to psychotherapy, as psychotherapy also addresses and tries to cure human suffering, yet without the religious dimension. In a recent interview, when asked about this trend to compare Buddhism to psychotherapy, Batchelor responded:

One certainly does not want to reduce Buddhism to, say, psychotherapy because then it could easily just get absorbed into Western culture, lose its own identity. I respect that warning, but on the other hand, if Buddhism doesn’t engage creatively in other forms of expression, it is quite likely to remain marginalized, to remain a specialist interest amongst a few groups of people.¹¹⁹

Here Batchelor acknowledges the potential danger of cultural dialogue leading to cultural absorption. Does Batchelor succeed in negotiating this line, or does his agnostic position discard Buddhism in favor of secular humanist assimilation? This question will be addressed throughout the remainder of the paper.

¹¹⁸ Batchelor, “Deep Agnosticism” 188.

¹¹⁹ Batchelor, <http://www.dharma.org/insight/batchelor.htm> 6.

4.2) Making Buddhism Accessible to Westerners

In Alone With Others Batchelor articulates his goal of making Buddhism accessible to Westerners. In the preface of this book he states: “I am trying to formulate for myself an approach to Buddhism that is compatible with and meaningful within the context of present-day life.”¹²⁰ He also states that the book is “a subjective attempt to find words and concepts within my own language and cultural frame of reference capable of satisfactorily articulating my faith in Buddhism.”¹²¹ This goal not only colors the text, but is its driving force. For example, Batchelor compares the clinging to religious belief structures with the phenomenon of clinging to material possessions. This analogy lies very much within a present-day cultural frame of reference, as developed nations around the world are largely consumer cultures, driven by the desire to accumulate wealth and material objects, and to possess things, people, or even religion. This analogy makes the problems of institutionalized Buddhism relevant to Western practitioners, as they can certainly relate to the trappings of consumer culture. Batchelor states, “instead of living in order to *have* more abundantly, it is necessary to live in order to *be* more abundantly.”¹²² According to Batchelor, the Dharma, rather than a set of structures and beliefs to be possessed, can help people achieve this state of being, as it challenges them on the most fundamental levels. The difference between possessing a belief versus uncovering one’s *being* is the difference between buying a styrofoam-wrapped salad and growing one’s own garden.

¹²⁰ Batchelor, Alone With Others 20 – 21.

¹²¹ Batchelor, Alone With Others 20.

¹²² Batchelor, Alone With Others 29.

Batchelor's attempt to make Buddhism comprehensible is also visible in his use of existential language and concepts. Indeed the entirety of Alone With Others reads like a text of Western existential philosophy peppered with a few references to Buddhism. When discussing the concept of "being" in Alone With Others, Batchelor uses such terms as "being-in-the-world"¹²³ and "being-with-others."¹²⁴ He also draws heavily upon the existential philosophy of Sartre and Heidegger in discussing how we are thrown into the world and left to confront our existence, our freedom, and our eventual death. Batchelor states, "Man is faced with the task of being responsible for his existence...But under the menacing and inescapable shadow of death, existence as such is anxiously felt as too massive and overwhelming to be concernfully accepted in its totality."¹²⁵ The task of the Dharma is to help us remain open to these existential concerns.

Although Batchelor feels that existentialism is a point of reference that will help Western practitioners understand Buddhism, and although he illustrates clearly what he sees as the points of overlap between Western-based existential philosophy and Buddhism, it is quite possible that many Western practitioners do not have any more understanding of existentialism than they do of Buddhism. Here Batchelor is certainly integrating Eastern and Western philosophy, yet in doing so he is not necessarily making Buddhism more accessible, as Alone With Others is still somewhat philosophically dense. Thus, although he succeeds in this book in mediating the two frameworks, they both present an intellectual challenge to a general audience of practitioners.

Clearer evidence of Batchelor's role as a cultural translator is evident in his later books. For example, in the preface to Buddhism Without Beliefs, Batchelor states: "I

¹²³ Batchelor, Alone With Others 61.

¹²⁴ Batchelor, Alone With Others 72.

have tried to write a book on Buddhism in ordinary English that avoids the use of foreign words, technical terms, lists, and jargon.”¹²⁶ True to his word, Buddhism Without Beliefs is the least technical and the least philosophically dense of Batchelor’s books. It is written in English that is clear and accessible, and it is largely devoid of Sanskrit words. For example, Batchelor uses the term “awakening” instead of *bodhi*, “anguish” instead of *dukkha*, and “awareness” instead of *smṛti*. He feels that for a majority of Westerners the terms “anguish” and “awareness” are more easily placed within a frame of reference than are their foreign counterparts. Batchelor understands that language is a powerful tool. As such, he uses skillful means, both in his choice of words and in the way he conveys concepts. Yet is Buddhism watered down when its foreign terms are relegated to endnotes? This will be answered as throughout the remainder of the paper.

Another way in which Batchelor makes Buddhism accessible is through his use of analogies. For example, in discussing the life of the historical Buddha, Batchelor writes:

Prince Siddhartha’s dilemma still faces us today. We too immerse ourselves in the ‘palaces’ of what is familiar and secure. We too sense that there is more to life than indulging desires and warding off fears. We too feel anguish most acutely when we break out of our habitual routines and witness ourselves hovering between birth and death.¹²⁷

Instead of maintaining that the Dharma and the Buddha are “other-worldly”, unattainable concepts, Batchelor brings them down to the level of everyday life, pointing out the relevance of Buddhist philosophy, concepts, and stories in our daily lives. He shows people that they can find lessons from seemingly distant Buddhist stories in their everyday lives.

¹²⁵ Batchelor, Alone With Others 61.

¹²⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs xi.

4.3) The Awakening of the West

In the interview mentioned above in which Batchelor discusses psychotherapy he states, “In order for Buddhism to communicate its message within a given culture it has to learn to speak the language of that culture. I don’t mean French or English, but the dominant cultural modes of expression.”¹²⁸ The Awakening of the West chronicles Buddhism’s first contact with Christian Europe, as well as its continued involvement in the West. It is a book devoted to the history of Buddhism’s integration into new cultures, and it describes the dialogue that ensued as a result of Buddhism’s interaction with new belief systems.

The historical developments on which Batchelor chooses to place emphasis are indicative of his goal of integrating Buddhism into a Western framework. He focuses primarily on reformist or revolutionary endeavors, or historical figures that devoted their energies to this process of integration. For example, in discussing twentieth century developments, Batchelor first discusses Sangharakshita’s creation of the non-sectarian Western Buddhist Order (WBO). The WBO, and its encompassing Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), strive to make Buddhism relevant to Westerners through its involvements in social action and right livelihood opportunities, as well as through its recognition of the particular needs of lay practitioners. There are currently numerous FWBO centres across Europe and North America, and they are an influential force in the shaping of Western Buddhism.

Secondly, Batchelor focuses on the life and work of Satya Narayan Goenka, a Burmese *vipassanā* teacher who revolutionized the way in which mindful awareness is

¹²⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 22.

perceived and taught. He is a major figure in contemporary Theravadin circles, and his ideas continue to influence Western Buddhist communities, including the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.

Thirdly, Batchelor describes the influence of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, peace activist, and author who has had an enormous impact on the “engaged” Buddhist movement which uses Buddhist philosophy as a basis for progressive social action. Thich Nhat Hanh has influenced, and continues to influence, much of the late twentieth century focus on combining Buddhism and social action. He feels that it is not enough to simply be a monk or a nun or a lay practitioner –one must use one’s own insight to better the world.

Although Batchelor mentions briefly other twentieth century developments, such as Soka Gakkai, or the Shambhala movement of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he describes in greater detail those movements that are in keeping with his agnostic agenda and his dislike of rigidity. Batchelor does not try to hide this bias. He writes: “Could we not imagine an individuated form of the Dharma grounded in small autonomous communities of spiritual friendship? Could we not envision an existential, therapeutic, democratic, imaginative, anarchic, and *agnostic* Buddhism for the West?”¹²⁹

The main message that emerges from The Awakening of the West is that Buddhism does not exist in a vacuum. The type of Buddhism being practiced around the world, as well as the extent of its popularity, is dependent on historical and cultural factors. Batchelor writes:

The forms Buddhism assumes as an institutional religion are always contingent upon historical conditions. Each Asian country in which Buddhism took root has

¹²⁸ Batchelor, <http://www.dharma.org/insight/batchelor.htm> 6.

¹²⁹ Batchelor, Awakening of West 277.

produced its own distinct variant of the Dharma, often, as we have seen, in response to political and cultural forces. And if it is to take root in Europe, a similar pattern of adaptation will inevitably follow.”¹³⁰

Batchelor emphasizes the fact that Buddhism is still in its formative stages in the West. It is still in the process of creating its identity, and its survival depends on its ability to adapt.¹³¹

4.4) Verses From the Center

Verses From the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime is Batchelor’s most recent book. In this book, published in 2000, Batchelor once again demonstrates his goal of making Buddhism relevant to modern Western practitioners.

The bulk of the book comprises a translation from the Tibetan of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK). Perhaps one of the most dense and cryptic of Mahayana texts, the MMK traditionally leaves scholars and students scratching their heads and wondering what possible meaning this text has, let alone what insight it may shed on their lives. This is not a text that would normally appeal to a mainstream audience. Thus it is perhaps the perfect challenge for Batchelor – can he make even the MMK accessible and relevant?

Batchelor’s translation of the MMK is readable and engaging, yet it is not philologically literal.¹³² For example, Batchelor relegates the entire first chapter of the

¹³⁰ Batchelor, *Awakening of West* 277.

¹³¹ Batchelor, *Awakening of West* 278.

¹³² For a more academic translation, Batchelor refers readers to Jay L. Garfield’s *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

MMK to endnotes, and many of the chapter titles are almost unrecognizable as translations of their Tibetan or Sanskrit counterparts. He translates *samskara*, the five aggregates that give rise to human existence, as simply “change”, and the twelve links of dependent origination, the basis for the argument that everything lacks inherent or independent nature, as “contingency”. Similarly, Batchelor’s interpretation of the verses themselves indicates an enormous departure from previous scholarly translations. For example, the first verse of chapter 16 is translated by Jay L. Garfield as follows:

If compound phenomena transmigrate,
 They do not transmigrate as permanent.
 If they are impermanent they do not transmigrate.
 The same approach applies to sentient beings.¹³³

The same verse is translated by Batchelor in a vastly different manner:

Is life what drives me?
 Whether constant or fleeting,
 Drives are not alive like life.
 How am I alive?¹³⁴

Batchelor’s poetic translation opens the door of Nāgārjunian philosophy to those who would not normally have access. He transforms the words of this ancient text into phrases and ideas that are current, relevant and highly readable. As stated in the introduction, Batchelor “seeks to translate *Verses from the Center* in such a way as to

¹³³ Garfield, Fundamental Wisdom 41.

make Nāgārjuna's insights come alive for anyone concerned with the question of what it means to live a free and awake life today."¹³⁵ Indeed they help awaken the reader to the relevance of these questions, and Batchelor translates them in such a way as to expose their existential intent. Challenging questions such as "How am I alive?" are recurring themes in much of Batchelor's writing. It is apparent that Batchelor is more than simply a linguistic translator; his goal is to transform not only foreign words into English, but foreign concepts into meaningful and relevant life philosophies.

Yet does Batchelor uphold poetics and personal relevance at the cost of accuracy? Is he sabotaging this vital Buddhist text and in so doing undermining the message of Buddhism in general? I conclude in section 6.2, "Is Buddhism Still Buddhism?", that although the text is not philologically accurate, Batchelor is not undermining the message of Buddhism because his motivation is to elicit an emotional response to the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

Preceding the MMK translation is an eighty-page essay on the role of Nāgārjuna in Buddhist philosophy. Unlike other scholars¹³⁶, it is apparent in this essay that Batchelor does not interpret Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness as nihilism or logical positivism. Rather, he sees emptiness as a highly relevant and inspirational force in our everyday lives, and he tries to impart this sense of enthusiasm to the reader. He claims that the key to understanding Nāgārjuna "lies in his understanding of emptiness as inseparable from the utter contingency of life itself."¹³⁷ Batchelor asserts that emptiness is what makes all things in life possible, including freedom. Here again Batchelor

¹³⁴ Batchelor, Stephen. Verses From the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime (New York: Riverhead, 2000) 108.

¹³⁵ Batchelor, Verses From Center xvi.

¹³⁶ Most notably David Kalupahana, Charles Lindtner, and Thomas E. Wood.

focuses on the existential concepts of freedom, as well as personal and social responsibility. The concept of emptiness, so often misunderstood among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, is interpreted here as the loosening of our grip on our self and the developing of flexibility. Whereas conventional interpretations of emptiness focus on philosophical interconnection and interdependence, Batchelor is emphasizing the relevant personal dimensions of this concept.

4.5) Success?

The task of determining the success of Batchelor's cultural translation is a difficult one. If looked at on the superficial level of book sales and popularity, then Batchelor has been extremely successful. His books have been widely popular, especially Buddhism Without Beliefs which was a bestseller in Britain and the United States. He has gained the respect of many influential people in Western Buddhist communities, and has been invited to give talks and workshops around the world. His work appears regularly in Tricycle Magazine, an influential Buddhist periodical, as well as numerous anthologies. His unconventional interpretations have certainly struck a chord with many Buddhist practitioners, and people obviously feel some affinity for his message.

Yet, as we have seen throughout this paper, there are many who disagree strongly with what Batchelor is espousing, and who feel that he has discarded the essence of Buddhism. Although Batchelor's desire is to see vibrant and relevant Buddhist communities around the world, and to demystify its "foreignness" in order that it become

¹³⁷ Batchelor, Verses From Center 20.

relevant in more people's lives, this is not achieved without a cost. It is only with hindsight that we can know what these costs will be, after witnessing the effects, both positive and negative, of cultural adaptation. In Batchelor's case it is still too early to know whether his attempts to create a relevant Buddhism will succeed, or if they will lead simply to assimilation.

What we do know is that Batchelor has succeeded in sparking debate within Western Buddhist communities. Debate is what molds, shapes, and changes religion, and debate is how religion adapts to the realities of people's lives and the cultural context in which it is surrounded. Ultimately, this is what Batchelor wants. He wants people to question Buddhist philosophies and principles, rather than accepting them blindly. He wants to witness Buddhist communities in which practitioners are engaged and active members. In this respect, Batchelor's project has been quite successful.

CHAPTER FIVE: A RETURN TO THE CRITIQUES

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the main criticisms leveled against Batchelor. It also discusses the cultural context and assumptions that influence the critics' fear of loss. The critiques are then addressed from Batchelor's perspective. It is concluded that while many of them hold some elements of truth, they are largely unwarranted. Many of the differences in perspective between Batchelor and his critics arise from Batchelor's deconstruction of the correlation between belief and action.

5.1) Overview of Main Arguments

The critiques of Batchelor's work by Punnadhammo, Bodhi, and Sangharakshita can be distilled into three main areas: 1) his dismissal of beliefs, 2) his "scientific materialist" stance, and 3) his rejection of ethics.

Firstly, the critics attack Batchelor's stance on belief. Bodhi and Sangharakshita in particular feel that without beliefs actions have no meaning and no context. Both assert that abandoning beliefs is like abandoning the raft of Dharma before one has even stepped on shore. Sangharakshita proposes that provisional beliefs, at least, are required for development on the spiritual path. He asserts that without provisional beliefs the path becomes not gradual but sudden, as one tries to jump immediately to the other shore, or to the realization of the emptiness of all phenomena. While it is possible to know intellectually the emptiness of beliefs, unless one has first held beliefs, says Sangharakshita, this realization does not hold emotional weight or meaning. The fact that

Buddhism is formulated as a path implies that there is something to journey towards and that these stages cannot be skipped.

Secondly, all three critics take issue with what they perceive as Batchelor's rejection of the supernatural, metaphysical, or "other-worldly" elements of existence, and his elevation of science and human reason. They all find problematic the fact that while Batchelor harshly criticizes Buddhist beliefs and values, he leaves Western values unscathed. They claim that there are limits to human reason; not everything can be explained by science and to attempt to do so is to raise human reason to ultimacy. Punnadhammo and Sangharakshita in particular equate Batchelor's agnosticism with scientific materialism, whereas Bodhi focuses primarily on Batchelor's outright rejection of orthodoxy. All three perceive Batchelor's lack of criticism of Western scientific values as either a partial or total denigration of the Dharma.

Thirdly, the critics take issue with what they perceive as Batchelor's questionable sense of ethics. Punnadhammo asserts that Batchelor's rejection of rebirth entails a rejection of ethics because without a belief in rebirth actions have no bearing or meaning. Ethical action becomes irrelevant when only this world and this lifetime are regarded as significant. Bodhi questions Batchelor's ethics from a slightly different angle. He claims that Batchelor's emphasis on our existential sense of personal responsibility has the potential to create disorder or anarchy, as individuals would simply focus on themselves. According to Bodhi a society requires concrete ethical guidelines for there to be order, stability, and moral action. In a third perspective on the subject, Sangharakshita condemns Batchelor's assertion that meditation practice is largely about developing awareness as well as self-acceptance and compassion. Sangharakshita claims that rather

than accept our negative mental states we must rid ourselves of them. He asserts that when we make an effort to change unskillful mental states, this has reverberations on ethical action. According to Sangharakshita, moral action is not something that simply arises spontaneously; it must be cultivated, learned, and worked on continuously.

The above areas of criticism can be regarded as by-products of a clash between tradition and modernity. They are emerging from a place of fear – fear that tradition is being lost in favor of modern values and beliefs. The critics fear that Batchelor’s stance against beliefs and his perceived discarding of the essence of tradition will disintegrate Buddhism into a threadbare relic. Their sense of security and identity is being challenged.

Yet this sense of fear is understandable. We live in a world where science and human reason are highly valued at the expense of less “rational” pursuits. Most institutional religions are on the decline, with the exception of certain strands of orthodoxy.¹³⁸ As our world becomes increasingly globalized, assimilated, and technologically advanced, we witness an increase in religious fundamentalism of all kinds, whether Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or Buddhist. Many religious practitioners are afraid of their belief systems being disrespected or disregarded, and are trying to assert control in a world in which they feel they have lost control and power. Although the critics we have examined certainly do not fall into the category of fundamentalist or extremist, they do reflect some of that same fear of loss. They do not necessarily wish to maintain the status quo, as evidenced by the reforms implemented by Sangharakshita, yet they wish that the integral elements of Buddhism remain intact.

¹³⁸ See Bibby, Reginald W. Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993).

Buddhist communities around the world, and especially in the West, are in similar states of change. As explained not only in Batchelor's The Awakening of the West, but also in a plethora of recent books either describing the changes in Buddhist communities or engaging in dialogue with other religious traditions¹³⁹, Buddhism is undergoing a process of transition. For example, Western Buddhist communities are trying to contend with the difficulties that arise when a largely monastic tradition is transplanted to a largely secular, lay, and family-oriented society. *Sanghas* have had to address this reality in hopes of finding ways to deal with the disparities between the monastic ideal and the realities of family life. Similarly, there is often more interaction between men and women in Western Buddhist communities. Many Buddhist teachers arriving from Asia have had difficulty adjusting to this reality, as evidenced by a number of publicized cases of sexual misconduct.¹⁴⁰

Punnadhammo, Bodhi, and Sangharakshita are products of this changing landscape, yet ironically, so is Batchelor himself. As discussed in the preface of the paper, during any time of change there are those who resist and those who encourage this process. Batchelor, Punnadhammo, Bodhi, and Sangharakshita all represent different reactions to similar environmental occurrences. All four are reacting to and instigating change. It is in this dialogue and debate, and in the passion shown on all sides, that religion remains dynamic. Like rocks rubbing against one another and smoothing each other out, each needs the other for refinement.

¹³⁹ Some recent books exploring Buddhism in the West and its interactions with other religious traditions include: Al Rapaport, ed. Buddhism in America: The Proceedings of the First Buddhism in America Conference. (Vermont: Tuttle, 1998); Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka, eds. The Faces of Buddhism in America. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Boucher, Sandy. Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Kamenetz, Roger. The Jew in the Lotus. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994)

5.2) Are the Critiques Defensible?

Bhikkhu Punnadhammo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Sangharakshita all assume that Batchelor has discarded much of the essence of Buddhism. In certain cases this assumption is supported through argument, yet in other instances it is unsubstantiated. The following analysis suggests that the critiques of Batchelor's dismissal of beliefs and his rejection of the raft of Dharma are defensible, yet the contentions that he is a scientific materialist who is dismissing ethics are tenuous.

5.2.1) Beliefs

Does, as Sangharakshita suggest, Batchelor dismiss even provisional beliefs? Is it the case that by discarding beliefs Batchelor is negating the context in which actions arise and claiming that action and belief are mutually exclusive? Is it true that by abandoning beliefs he is abandoning the raft and as such abandoning the entire Buddhist path?

Batchelor's primary stance is that beliefs in themselves are not damaging or inhibiting; it is the *clinging* to beliefs that inhibits spiritual growth. Batchelor sees no problem in regarding beliefs as tools: "The true value of any dogma or belief lies in its ability to point beyond itself to a deeper reality."¹⁴¹ This statement suggests that Batchelor feels beliefs are valuable in that they point to the existential responsibility at the heart of our lives. It is only when beliefs are regarded as absolute interpretations of the Dharma, or when they become rigid structures that are clung to for security, that they become problematic.

¹⁴⁰ See Boucher, Sandy. Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). chapter 5.

However, in support of Sangharakshita, Batchelor's statements of provisional belief, such as the ones mentioned above, are found mostly in his earlier writing. In Buddhism Without Beliefs, these all but disappear and are replaced by statements of dismissal, such as: "When belief and opinion are suspended, the mind has nowhere to rest. We are free to begin a radically other kind of questioning."¹⁴² It is almost impossible to detect in such a statement any appreciation for the provisional nature of beliefs. However, Batchelor's goal is to shake people out of their rigid thought processes and to encourage practitioners to regard beliefs simply as tools. This is a difficult task, and as such he must use strong language in order to convey his point and to achieve his goal.

The critics claim that by negating the importance of beliefs Batchelor is negating the *context* of actions. In other words, they claim that although Batchelor places emphasis on action, by dismissing beliefs he is paradoxically dismissing the context for such actions. The gulf between Batchelor and his critics seems to lie in where they *locate* the context of an action. Whereas the critics perceive the context for action in belief, Batchelor perceives the context for action in human emotion and responsibility. Although it is traditionally thought that belief leads to such emotion or responsibility (i.e. if we believe that it is wrong to steal we will automatically have a matching emotional response) Batchelor dissects this correlation. He removes emotional response from belief, and claims the opposite – that emotional response can be hindered by belief. To return to an example raised in chapter three, Batchelor claims that simply believing in the Four Noble Truths does not entail acting on them appropriately. An emotional

¹⁴¹ Batchelor, Alone With Others 41.

¹⁴² Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 97.

understanding of anguish, the first Noble Truth, can only be attained when we allow ourselves to surrender to the point at which we “witness ourselves hovering between birth and death.”¹⁴³ Batchelor claims that this raw state from which action emerges must be felt rather than replicated through mere belief. Thus, rather than simply negating the context for action, as the critics stipulate, Batchelor is in fact dissecting our assumptions that beliefs and actions are intimately interconnected. He is not necessarily claiming that belief and action are mutually exclusive; he is trying to get to the heart of what really instigates action. In this model actions do not become meaningless, as the critics fear. Rather, they become more meaningful because they are emerging from the deepest part of oneself. As such, the critics’ assumptions are unsubstantiated and their arguments groundless.

However, there is strength to the claim that Batchelor is abandoning the raft before stepping on shore. Although Batchelor’s desire is that practitioners not be weighed down by belief structures at the expense of existential action and emotion, this is a difficult proposition for those just beginning on the Buddhist path. For example, when we learn to ride bicycles as children, we usually practice on bicycles that have training wheels. When we have mastered this stage, we remove the training wheels and discover the freedom of fast, independent riding. Similarly, beliefs are like training wheels that can only be removed once the initial motions of the Buddhist path have been mastered. Although Batchelor is advocating that beliefs not be clung to, this clinging is for some practitioners one step in the process that leads eventually to freedom. Batchelor is afraid that practitioners will rely too much on the training wheels, yet there must be some provisions made for those just beginning Buddhist practice. To make a similar analogy,

¹⁴³ Batchelor, *Faith to Doubt* 71.

there is a vast difference between someone who is born into wealth and then renounces it, and someone who is simply born into financial poverty. In the former case, the individual goes *through* a process of examination and, ultimately, renunciation. In the latter case, the individual is simply thrown into poverty with no chance for conscious decision-making. One must have wealth before discarding it just as one must have beliefs before discarding them or lightening their impact.

Although the critics' arguments that Batchelor is abandoning the raft are reasonable, their assumption that in doing so Batchelor is discarding the entire Buddhist path are unsubstantiated. Ultimately Batchelor's goal is simply to make the path more relevant, and to imbue it with more personal meaning for practitioners. Certainly he is not advocating a traditional route to nirvana, but he is still advocating a journey, simply one of a more personal nature. He is trying to return to what he feels is the heart of the Buddhist endeavor – the challenging of one's fixed ideas and presuppositions.

Sangharakshita also claims that Batchelor, by advising practitioners to simply act without reflecting upon what they are acting, is ironically advocating a sudden, rather than a gradual, path. Sangharakshita claims that Batchelor's emphasis on blind action is disguised authoritarianism that undermines the notion of gradual awakening. This critique seems to ignore the fact that much of Buddhism Without Beliefs is devoted to the discussion of mindful awareness and the necessity of being fully aware of our actions. Batchelor claims that we must be aware not of our beliefs, but of our fundamental emotions, desires, and responsibilities. Thus, to claim that Batchelor is advocating blind action is to dismiss the parts of Buddhism Without Belief that discuss mindfulness.

In sum, much of the difference in opinion between Batchelor and his critics lies in where they locate the basis for the spiritual life. Whereas the critics feel that traditional belief structures give rise to spiritual fulfillment, Batchelor feels that such structures inhibit such fulfillment. A true spiritual sense, says Batchelor, must come from within. Whereas the critics locate the answers to life's questions in beliefs, Batchelor asserts that it is the questions themselves that are important. According to Batchelor, it is the perplexity of the questions rather than the security of beliefs that prompts the development of spiritual maturity.

5.2.2) *Scientific Materialism*

Punnadhammo asserts that Batchelor's agnosticism is equivalent to materialism because it does not accept as valid phenomena that are beyond rational explanation. He also suggests that it upholds a self-view that is incompatible with the Buddhist doctrine of not-self. Sangharakshita asserts that there are limits to human reason and that religious phenomena cannot be explained by science. Is it true that Batchelor is denigrating the Dharma by upholding human reason and the scientific process?

While it is valid to say that Batchelor is an advocate of rational thought, he does not pedestalize human reason or science at the expense of metaphysical phenomena. The main message of Batchelor's agnosticism is the following: "I don't know". This is extremely different from an outright "No". Batchelor is not denying that metaphysical phenomena exist; he is simply stating that it is not only difficult, but pointless, to try to prove their existence. It is the questions, not the answers, that are meaningful.

According to Batchelor, when questioning is hindered, the whole goal of Buddhist practice dissolves.

Batchelor is not reifying human reason at the expense of the supernatural. On the contrary, Batchelor's agnosticism expresses respect for the potential magnitude of the supernatural or other-worldly. He is asserting that such phenomena, which cannot be explained by reason, also cannot be explained by uncritical belief. They are too large and too multi-faceted to be placed into a narrow category of definition. Defining as belief something that is completely beyond the human realm, such as rebirth, reduces the phenomena into something graspable, yet also safe and one-dimensional. According to Batchelor, the only way to honour the magnitude and multi-dimensionality of a concept like rebirth is to conceptualize it as a question.

According to Batchelor, having the faith to surrender into this state of unknowing and perplexity is the very essence of not-self. All the things that we cling to for identity, the things that normally make up what we regard as our "self", come under scrutiny and questioning. Thus, far from opposing the Buddhist doctrine of not-self, Batchelor claims that the only way to achieve such a realization of emptiness is to fully examine and to question all facets of one's life. It is when other-worldly phenomena are made into concrete beliefs for the sake of self-definition and security, that the self is upheld and pedestalized. For example, a belief in rebirth provides a sense of self-definition and purpose. It is this constant focus on the self, rather than its perplexed counterpart, that contradicts the Buddhist notion of not-self.

In this respect, Batchelor's agnosticism is not, as the critics claim, the equivalent of materialism. Materialism implies a complete denial of anything beyond rational

comprehension. Batchelor, however, only claims that we cannot make *definitive statements* about non-rational phenomena. He does not deny their existence outright. Batchelor writes: “In refusing to be drawn into the answers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, ‘it is this’ and ‘it is not that’, it lets go of the extremes of affirmation and negation, something and nothing.”¹⁴⁴

5.2.3) *Ethics*

Bhikkhu Punnadhammo regards rebirth as the crux of Buddhist ethics, and thus he feels that by discarding the doctrine of rebirth Batchelor is discarding the ethical basis of Buddhism. Obtaining a positive rebirth, and eventually ending the cycles of rebirth altogether, is what provides incentive to act ethically in this lifetime, says Punnadhammo. Is it the case that by de-emphasizing rebirth Batchelor is de-emphasizing the ethical aspects of Buddhism?

Just as was the case in the discussion on actions, Punnadhammo and Batchelor have different ideas about where the basis or context of ethics lies. Whereas Punnadhammo locates this basis in rebirth, Batchelor deconstructs the correlation between ethics and rebirth. He claims, “demonstrating that death will be followed by another life is not the same as demonstrating that a murderer will be reborn in hell and a saint in heaven.”¹⁴⁵ According to Batchelor, regardless of whether rebirth is a tangible phenomenon, it does not have bearing on our ethical behavior. Although Batchelor does assert that our behavior creates reverberations in the world through our inevitable impact on people’s lives, he feels that the real basis for ethics lies in an emotional and

¹⁴⁴ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 98.

¹⁴⁵ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 37.

compassionate response to those around us and to our environment. A belief in rebirth can hinder this response because it focuses our energies on the future, and removes the spontaneous emotional reaction that develops from mindfulness. According to Batchelor, “it is not enough to *want* to feel [compassion] toward others. We need to be alert at all times to the invasion of thoughts and emotions that threaten to break in and steal this open and caring resolve.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, it is not enough to simply know intellectually how one must act; this sense of knowing must also be felt. The only way to attain this sense of emotional knowing, according to Batchelor, is to be constantly mindful, open, and unencumbered by beliefs or preconceived notions of good and bad.

Due to the different assumptions at work regarding the basis of ethics, it is difficult to conclude whether Punnadhammo’s critique is justified or not. The difference in views between the two men is just that, a difference in views regarding the location of ethical action. While Punnadhammo views Batchelor’s deconstruction of the correlation between beliefs and ethics as an outright dismissal of ethics, this is not necessarily the case. Batchelor is simply locating the basis for ethics in personal responsibility and compassion.

Bhikkhu Bodhi also feels that focusing on emotional awareness and compassion at the expense of concrete ethical guidelines creates a slippery slope into societal disorder. He feels that Batchelor is dismissing completely whatever guidelines shape Buddhist ethics, primarily those of karma and rebirth.

Batchelor’s rebuttal to Bodhi’s suggestions is that ethics is not something to possess. Ethical action must come from a genuine concern for others, rather than from self-concern. As explained by Batchelor in Alone With Others, “despite all

¹⁴⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 89.

magnanimous commitments and generous deeds, [self-concern] silently measures the ultimate worth of these things in terms of the personal satisfaction that results from them.”¹⁴⁷ The doctrine of rebirth falls into this category, for although moral actions are being performed, they are ultimately for one’s own benefit of being reborn into a good life. Yet if all these obstacles are removed, as Batchelor advocates, we can experience authentic being-with-others, which leads to authentic compassion, which in turn leads to authentic ethics. According to Batchelor, authentic being-with-others entails listening, engaging in dialogue, and trying not to impose our own agenda of self-concern. In this state of mind, “we recognize the equality between others...This involves realizing that just as I seek comfort, security and happiness, and wish to avoid suffering, fear and pain, so do you.”¹⁴⁸ And herein lies the basis of ethics, according to Batchelor. Here again we see a clash of assumptions regarding the location of ethical action.

According to Sangharakshita, it is not enough for compassion to simply arise spontaneously. He finds fault with Batchelor’s emphasis on self-acceptance for he feels that ethical action requires work. Practitioners cannot simply accept unskillful thoughts or behavior without working to change them, says Sangharakshita, as this undermines the ethical emphasis of Buddhism. According to Sangharakshita, Buddhist teachings distinguish clearly right from wrong.

Although Batchelor advocates a radical awareness that entails the acceptance of all our human traits, he asserts that this acceptance leads ultimately to insight into our responses and behaviors. For example, “to embrace hatred does not mean to indulge it.

¹⁴⁷ Batchelor, Alone With Others 77.

¹⁴⁸ Batchelor, Alone With Others 83.

To embrace hatred is to accept it for what it is: a disruptive but transient state of mind.”¹⁴⁹ On the contrary, denying or repressing feelings of hatred could lead to uncontrolled and unproductive outbursts without the accompanying insight. According to Batchelor, “acceptance might even lead to understanding what it is that we’re running from.”¹⁵⁰ The cultivation of patience and self-compassion is an integral part of ethics.

As well, Batchelor is not claiming that all ethical action arises spontaneously. It seems as though Sangharakshita overlooked an entire chapter in Buddhism Without Beliefs entitled “Resolve” in which Batchelor asserts that ethics involves work, as well as a strong will. In this chapter Batchelor acknowledges that the will is an important factor in Dharma practice: “Dharma practice is founded on resolve. This is not an emotional conversation, 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.”¹⁵¹ In order to act upon this resolve, we require commitment, as well as self-confidence in our ability to awaken.¹⁵² Thus, although the impetus for ethical action might arise spontaneously from a sense of deep connection and compassion for others, the acting upon such feelings requires strength of will.

Batchelor furthers this notion in Verses From the Center, in which he discusses how emptiness is a source of ethics. Here he states: “Contrary to expectation, an empty self turns out to be a relational self”¹⁵³ and that “emptiness becomes the basis for an ethics of spontaneous empathetic responsiveness.”¹⁵⁴ When the grip onto which we hold

¹⁴⁹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 60.

¹⁵⁰ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 61.

¹⁵¹ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 41.

¹⁵² Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 43.

¹⁵³ Batchelor, Verses From Center 33.

¹⁵⁴ Batchelor, Verses From Center 34.

ourselves loosens, we are free to fully experience the relational nature of our interactions with others.

Due to the clashing assumptions with which Batchelor and his critics are working, it is difficult to assess the justification of the critiques. The critics assert that traditional belief structures lead to the cultivation of an inner sense of spirituality. Batchelor asserts that this inner sense of spirituality and existential feeling must be the starting point of the religious path, and it may or may not lead to an outward sense of structure. Is this outward structure still Buddhism, or simply a Buddhist-influenced secular humanism? This issue is addressed in the following, and final, chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: DOES BUDDHISM STOP BEING BUDDHISM?

This chapter recognizes that Batchelor is challenging the religiosity of Buddhism, both through his philosophy and in his role as a cultural translator. It analyzes whether one of the implications of such a challenge is that Buddhism ceases to be Buddhism. It concludes that Batchelor's brand of Buddhism should retain the label Buddhism, as it stems from a desire to uncover the heart of the Dharma. Batchelor is not challenging Buddhism's teachings of inter-relatedness and emptiness; rather, he is dissecting the correlation between the Dharma and the institutional structures in which it is encompassed. Despite this, it is impossible to know what the future impact of Batchelor's vision of Buddhism will be.

6.1) Challenging Buddhism as a Religion

It is almost impossible to develop a definition of religion that is satisfying to all religious practitioners, as there exist a myriad of ideas about what are fundamental and peripheral ingredients for the religious life. In the case of Buddhism this task becomes even more complex, as there is no God-head to serve as a focal point. Yet for Batchelor, as well as his critics, the term religion implies a set of beliefs, rituals, and institutional structures that are either espoused by a teacher or which have evolved throughout time. Whereas for the critics the term "religion" encompasses both the structures as well as the

spiritual heart of Buddhism, for Batchelor religion means only the institutional structures. And these structures he is indeed challenging.

Whereas the critics view Buddhism's encompassing institutional structures as necessary for the survival of the religion, Batchelor claims that Buddhism's religious dimension detracts from the underlying existential concerns that initially prompted the formulation of the religion. *He thus deconstructs the correlation between religion and the Dharma.* This will be addressed further in section 6.2.

The critics claim that by negating the religiosity of Buddhism, Batchelor has dismissed all that makes Buddhism unique and distinct from mainstream culture. These concerns are quite valid. It is impossible to deny that Batchelor's agnosticism is challenging the religious nature of Buddhism, as well as its key texts and traditions. Statements such as: "There is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about this path"¹⁵⁵ and "The Dharma in fact might well have more in common with Godless secularism than with the bastions of religion"¹⁵⁶ indicate clearly Batchelor's desire is to separate what he feels is the crux of Buddhism from the religious structures in which it is enclosed.

Batchelor's challenge to rebirth and to conventional notions of enlightenment presents an undeniable rejection of the traditional aspects of Buddhism. Rebirth and enlightenment are perhaps the two concepts within Buddhism that require the most devotion and faith. They make up what the majority of practicing Buddhists regard as essential to the Buddhist path. Yet Batchelor sees these concepts not as truths but as defense mechanisms or security structures that inhibit, rather than enhance, Buddhism.

¹⁵⁵ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 10.

¹⁵⁶ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 16.

Batchelor's entire philosophy hinges on the idea that Buddhism is primarily *not* a religion with belief systems, rituals, and institutional structures. First and foremost, says Batchelor, Buddhism is a set of psychological teachings that serve to challenge us as human beings and to expose our existential responsibilities. Batchelor asserts that Buddhism did not begin as a religion, but that it was later transformed into one, to the detriment of its agnostic roots.¹⁵⁷ Batchelor mourns the loss of this agnostic dimension, as he feels that "the gradual extrapolation of these primarily existential concerns into a religious form...had the ironic consequence of producing a greater sense of alienation between the Buddhist and the Buddha."¹⁵⁸ In other words, as a result of its institutionalization, the focus of Buddhism is less on each human being's personal development and more on a structured belief system with a God-like figure head.

Contrary to general conceptions about the prerequisites for leading a spiritual life, Batchelor claims that it is not necessary to be religious in the traditional sense of the word in order to be a Buddhist. Batchelor speaks from his own experience: "I think I spent a lot of time pretending to be religious and I really don't believe that one has to be religious or a religious person to practice the Dharma."¹⁵⁹ In other words, Batchelor feels that practicing rituals or adopting beliefs are not prerequisites for practicing the Dharma.

The debate thus revolves around what the word "religious" actually means. For the critics it means believing in the word of the Buddha and following the path that he proposed, which leads to spirituality. For Batchelor, spirituality means honouring impermanence, emptiness, and personal existential challenge. Religion is the armor in which hides these inner dimensions from view.

¹⁵⁷ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 15 – 17.

¹⁵⁸ Batchelor, Alone With Others 49.

6.2) Is Buddhism Still Buddhism?

What are the implications of Batchelor's challenge to the religiosity of Buddhism? Is Buddhism no longer Buddhism, according to Batchelor's schema?

It is extremely difficult to determine if and when a religion ceases to be a religion. As discussed throughout this paper, religion is a dynamically evolving entity in dialogue with its historical and cultural surroundings. Throughout the history of Buddhism in particular, there were many instances in which practitioners felt that the essence of their religion was being lost. For example, the evolution of the Mahāyāna sects caused many Theravadin Buddhists to feel that the message of their religion was being unrecognizably altered. Even today there are still many Theravadins who feel that Mahāyāna Buddhists are not "real" Buddhists, or visa versa. This sentiment is found in most major world religions. For example, many orthodox Jews do not view reform Jews as true practitioners.

In Batchelor's case, what we *can* conclude is that he is indeed challenging what is currently understood to be Buddhism, as perceived by the majority of practitioners around the world. He has stripped away many of the devotional and ritualistic aspects of the tradition. However, although Batchelor is challenging the religiosity of Buddhism, his motivation for doing so is simply to return to what he feels are its roots, which is, paradoxically, that there are no inherent roots. The Dharma is impermanent, empty, and constantly changing. Batchelor's agnostic philosophy is thus presenting no challenge to the Dharma, only to the structures in which it is encased. *As such, Batchelor's particular brand of Buddhism should still be labeled Buddhism.*

¹⁵⁹ Batchelor, "Deep Agnosticism" 181.

Batchelor questions the correlation between religion and the Dharma. Traditionally the Dharma and its encompassing structures, if not synonymous, are at least regarded as interconnected. However, Batchelor views the Dharma as the heart of the matter, and the religion as the institutional structure in which it is trapped. Batchelor's goal is to break open the structure in order to fully expose the substance, which is that there is no inherent or absolute core to Buddhism. Buddhism, as a constantly evolving entity, provides no answers, only questions and impermanence.

Batchelor's motivation to keep the heart of the tradition alive is apparent even in the areas in which he is perceived to be parting with tradition the most. For example, Batchelor's agnostic attitude toward rebirth presents an undeniable altering of the substance of Buddhism. Yet although this position presents a challenge to the traditional substance and core beliefs of Buddhism, Batchelor's motivation for this position is not one of rejection. On the contrary, his goal is that practitioners embrace fully the challenge presented by the idea of rebirth. He wants people to question their beliefs and values, and to make decisions based on personal existential sentiment rather than on tradition or institutional pressures. He wants, fundamentally, for practitioners to adopt an attitude of faith – not blind faith but the faith to surrender to questioning. In light of his motivation to keep the flame of the Dharma alive and active, Batchelor's (re)vision of Buddhism should still be regarded as Buddhism.

This motivation must also be kept in mind when examining Batchelor's efforts to make Buddhism more accessible. Does he water down Buddhism by employing "foreign-free" language in the hopes of making Buddhist concepts accessible? Batchelor's intent in using accessible language is to strip Buddhism of its foreign

mystique and to make it as relevant and as understandable as possible for Western practitioners. It is a type of skillful means. The bare concepts, not the foreign terminology, are what give Buddhism its uniqueness; language is simply a cultural construction that is used to dress up these concepts. Thus, just as Batchelor tries to break open the religious structures of Buddhism to reveal its substance, he also tries to break through the wall of foreign and academic terminology to get at the fundamental concepts.

This phenomenon is most visible in Verses From the Center. This text, although it is not philologically accurate, never strove to be a definitive translation. Batchelor's motivation is primarily to elicit an emotional response and to make readers *feel* Nāgārjuna's message rather than simply grapple with it intellectually. As for altering the substance of Buddhism, the MMK is so obscure that a myriad of vastly different interpretations have been presented by scholars. Batchelor's poetic interpretation is simply one of many elucidations of this obscure text.

Although Batchelor's particular brand of Buddhism should maintain the label Buddhism it does not mean that, if implemented, his project would not lead to assimilation. Batchelor himself is aware of these dangers. For example, in the interview mentioned in chapter four of this paper, Batchelor concedes that Buddhism, if equated with psychotherapy, could lose its spiritual dimension. This is a very real danger facing many spiritual traditions, especially ones that do not yet have solid roots in their new cultural context. Yet there is no better way to deal with this threat than to keep the tradition as relevant as possible to the lives of its practitioners. It is when a tradition loses meaning and relevance that it merges more fully into its exterior surroundings. Thus,

although we cannot predict its outcome, Batchelor's project to maintain Buddhism's relevance can be seen as a noble attempt to prevent such assimilation.

Batchelor presents his own vision of the future of Buddhism as the following:

The democratic and agnostic imperatives of the secular world demand not another Buddhist Church, but an individuated community, where creative imagination and social engagement are valued as highly as philosophic reflection and meditative attainment.¹⁶⁰

This is a vision of Buddhism that is focused on the individual, and spreads outward in its concern for the collective. It is not a traditionally religious vision, yet it is one that is appealing in its relevance.

¹⁶⁰ Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs 114.

CONCLUSION

One question has framed this paper: Is Buddhism still Buddhism according to Batchelor's agnostic interpretation? The answer arrived at through much analysis is yes. Yes, Batchelor's Buddhism is still Buddhism, albeit a Buddhism stripped of many of its conventional trappings.

This conclusion has been arrived at primarily because Batchelor's motivation, as evidenced throughout his books and as illustrated throughout this paper, is to make Buddhism comprehensible and accessible in order to increase its relevance in the lives of practitioners. His goal is to elicit an emotional response within practitioners that will in turn trigger inward questioning. In doing so Batchelor strips Buddhism down to its bare bones. He removes the spices so practitioners can taste its flavor. It is because of this strong and enthusiastic desire to perpetuate the Dharma, that is impossible to accuse Batchelor of discarding with the essence of Buddhism.

Secondly, Batchelor's Buddhism is still Buddhism because he calls it such. He considers himself a Buddhist, as do other scholars and practitioners who take his work seriously. Batchelor refers to Buddhist texts, extracts from Buddhist terminology, translates from Buddhist manuscripts, and expresses no desire to call his spiritual tradition anything other than what it is – Buddhism. Although he advocates cultural dialogue, his work directly affects the permeable boundaries of Buddhist communities around the world. His thoughts and philosophies are not only *about* Buddhism, but they directly *implicate* Buddhism. For example, whereas certain new age traditions or cults draw upon Biblical sources, their philosophies do not necessarily impact on Judeo-

Christian communities. This is not the case with Batchelor's work. His agnostic ideas directly affect Buddhist philosophy and practice, because they are fundamentally about Buddhism.

It is evident that testing one's level of commitment to a religious tradition is not as straightforward as testing PH levels with litmus paper. Determining whether a religion's boundaries are still intact is a highly subjective enterprise, especially in the case of a religion such as Buddhism in which there is no God-given authority, but rather a focus on human agency. The Buddha was simply a human being who taught his disciples about *dukkha* and the path out of *dukkha*. Yet, he also taught disciples not to become attached to this path. In this respect, although there subsequently developed many authoritative Buddhist texts, there is room throughout for a high degree of individualism.

The boundaries of the problem are thus "objective authority", God-given or top down, on one end, and relativism, individual or bottom-up, on the other. On this scale between "objectivity" and relativism, Batchelor lies somewhere in the middle, as do probably most practitioners of most religions. In other words, Batchelor draws upon, and regards as valid, many authoritative Buddhist texts, yet he injects his own interpretations and personal adjustments – adjustments that he feels enhances, rather than undermines, the tradition. He accepts the general framework of Buddhism, yet emphasizes its spirit of individual questioning.

These boundaries between objectivity and relativism are relevant to all aspects of contemporary life. Throughout the world today, not only in the study and practice of religion, we are witnessing shifting boundaries and definitions. For example, many ultra-orthodox Jews do not regard non-orthodox Jews as being "true" Jews. Many Catholics

do not regard Protestants as being Christians. In a world in which religious and cultural dialogue is gaining in popularity and necessity, how we define what makes a Jew a Jew or a Christian a Christian will continue to be pertinent questions. These questions are particularly relevant for Buddhist communities in the Western world, as they are only in their formative stages.

This paper has provided simply one example of current debates regarding spiritual definitions and the boundaries of religions. As illustrated throughout this paper, many feel uncomfortable with expanding boundaries and subjective spirituality and wish to tighten the reigns of authority. As globalization continues to grow in all areas of life, such issues will also grow in importance and further study will be a necessity.

In the meantime, there are many with whom Batchelor's vision resonates. They connect with his vision of a Buddhism that emanates from within each of us, yet which carries a sense of existential responsibility. They resonate with his call for small spiritual communities in which practitioners actively formulate a spirituality based on their own inner questioning. This pared down and exposed Buddhism is perhaps less a Buddhism without beliefs, and more a Buddhism without baggage.

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