

Secular Buddhism – A Study Retreat

Stephen Batchelor, Gaia House, Devon, England • July 15, 2013

Study Guide • Part 2 of 7

Solitude

Reflections on the Guhatthakasutta (The Discourse of Eight on the Cell) from the Atthakavagga of the Sutta Nipata (Sn. 772-9)

1. The voice we hear in this poem is of one who having chosen to practice in solitude, is anguished by his awareness of being '*...sunk in [his own] dark passions*'. The author too, is anguished in his awareness of the dilemma of the conflicting hungers of pursuing dead ends. List, in order of explicit to implicit, the multiple dead ends that are evoked in this poem.
2. While the second of the four tasks, arising is to be let go of, is core to the spiritual counsel offered in this poem, the author eloquently describes the nature of letting go of what arises; the thrust of the poem is more illustrative than doctrinal. In what way does his description resonate or not resonate with your own experiences of letting go of craving?
3. Contemplate the verses *hard to be free from the wants...* through *...no one else can save you*. Why is it that to be free of *the wants that bind*, one cannot depend upon anyone other than oneself?
4. Batchelor points out another reference to the four in the first lines of the last two verses in *embrace what you meet and don't be obsessed* and *embrace what you perceive and cross the flood*. With respect to the fourth of the four tasks, the path that is to be cultivated, what is the counsel the author offers?

5. The term *pariññā*, here translated as 'embrace' in the two lines referred to above, refers respectively to what impacts one, i.e. contacts one's sense faculties, and what is perceived, i.e. what appears to the mental faculty. What is the author's point in distinguishing what one 'meets' and what one 'perceives' when he advises that in the first instance of contact, one not be 'obsessed' and in the latter instance of perception, to 'cross the flood'?

6. In his remarks on habitual reactivity that can take the form of narrative, story, memories, associations, etc., Batchelor points out that this too is to be embraced; it is to be fully known. Is this habitual reactivity what one 'meets' or is this habitual reactivity what one 'perceives'? In your experience, what follows on such an embrace; what follows on fully knowing this reactivity? Provide an example to illustrate your point.

7. What are your thoughts on the observation that when one's field of awareness contracts, narrows to less than the totality of what's going on, we tend to lose it, i.e. we're carried away, overwhelmed, lost to the flood. What, in your experience, is typically excluded from your awareness when you recognise that you've been carried away?

8. What do the words 'embrace what you perceive and cross the flood' evoke for you?

9. The two core positive values that are expressed in this poem are solitude itself and leading a life in balance. The author counsels *Don't be thrown off course for the sake of what you know to be unbalanced* and *Avoid indulging in what you reproach yourself for*. Why is it that solitude reveals the course that one has committed to? How does avoidance of indulgence in what one reproaches oneself for, reveal a balanced way of life? What assumptions underlie this advice?

10. In the verse *the creature inside its cell-sunk in dark passions is a long, long way from solitude*, the *cell-sunk in dark passions* refers the private aspects of ourselves that could be experienced as an anxious loneliness, an insistent inward

rumination, and the *solitude* (of the heart, *citta-viveka*) refers to the capacity to be with what is going on but not being of it. This solitude of the heart, this capacity, likened to an open unobstructed space, is cultivated through meditation. If your practice, at times, takes you into a *cell-sunk in dark passions*, describe the textures, the momentum, the force of sinking. If your practice at times takes you into solitude, an open spacious awareness, describe the textures, the momentum, the force of solitude.

11. The Buddha was asked 'what does it mean to fully know (*pariññā*)' i.e. to 'embrace'. The Buddha answered that it is the end of greed, the end of hatred, the end of bewilderment. What are the qualities of this fully knowing, this embrace, that is the end of greed, hatred and bewilderment?

12. The verses ... *compelled by a thirst for what's going on – weak men gabbling in the mouth of death, their thirst for 'it is' and 'it is not' unquenched* evokes the fruitless efforts of those who compulsively analyse and represent what is and what is not. What compels us to pursue beliefs, to argue beliefs, to attempt to gain a certainty of what is and what is not?

13. In the verse, *having extracted the arrow, he is vigilant – not longing for this world or the next*, 'the arrow' refers to a craving, and in this poem, it is a craving, a grasping for a belief, a certainty of what *is* and what *is not*. How do you read the meaning of *he is vigilant – not longing for this world or the next*?

14. In Batchelor's view, extracting the arrow refers to the third and fourth tasks, the third being the experience of stopping the craving which enables the fourth, the path, to unfold. If one abandons *gabbling in the mouth of death* and embraces the uncertainty of what is and what is not, how is it that this embrace enables the path to unfold?



¶ The talk to which the questions above relate, along with the others given by Stephen and Martine Batchelor during the course of this study retreat, can be found on both the Secular Buddhism Aotearoa New Zealand website at: <http://secularbuddhism.org.nz/resources/retreats-conferences/online-study-retreat/> and at: <http://dharmaseed.org/retreats/1954/>. Dharma Seed welcomes your donations to enable them to provide the service of enabling talks by Buddhist teachers to be freely downloaded and streamed.

¶ This study guide was written by Christine Johnson for a course at Upaya Sangha of Tucson, AZ, USA from September through December 2014.

¶ Stephen and Martine Batchelor follow the Buddhist tradition of not charging for the teachings they give, the organisations that host their retreats and seminars generally only covering their travel expenses. However in return for their teaching and instruction, Martine and Stephen gratefully accept donations which enable them to continue doing this work. If you would like to support them you can do so using your debit card, credit card or PayPal here: <http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/donation>

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