

Secular Buddhism – A Study Retreat

Stephen Batchelor, Gaia House, Devon, England • July 19, 2013

Study Guide • Part 6 of 7

On Emptiness

Reflections on the Culasunnattasutta (The Short Discourse on Emptiness) from the Majjhima Nikaya (M. 121)

1. Read silently or recite aloud the four poems. Consider Batchelor's remark that contemplating these verses was for him, a 'kind of shock therapy'. Is this so for you too? What impact is there for you, if any, in contemplating these verses?

2. In your reading of the poems, do you sense that the admonition to be without opinions is to be taken literally, i.e. one is 'to live a life without any views or opinions' or do you think the author means to suggest that 'one should learn not to identify with one's views and opinions' and so to 'treat them more lightly'? Why is this? Could you read the verses variously, depending on the moment? Why is this?

3. Mara, while ineffectual – as illustrated in the metaphor of the hungry crow mistaking a stone for food – continues to be present in the Buddha's life. Mara points out the nature of freedom: that 'freedom is not a question of deleting some experience of our body and mind'. What then is freedom?

4. Compare the thrust of classical dharma, in which views/opinions are of the same 'order' as greed, hatred and delusion (the *kleshas*) with a common contemporary understanding that distinguishes views/opinions from the *kleshas* or similarly, distinguishes the intellect from the emotions. How is it that we commonly make this distinction given that they coexist, that they are

characteristic of human nature and that humans are, so to speak, hardwired with views/*klesha* or intellect/emotions?

5. If you agree with Batchelor, that the author of these poems point the reader to the conclusion that one is not to demonise views/opinions, that one is to instead learn to live with these views/opinions 'in a more mindful sensitive, and ironic way', how then would you then interpret the following stanzas:

*He [the sage] doesn't elaborate, nor does he flatter,
he is suspicious of 'perfection' –
having cut the knots that bind,
he nurtures no longing for anything.*

and

*He [the sage] is not lured into the blind alleys
Of is and is not, this world and the next –
For he lacks those commitments
That make people ponder and seize hold of the teachings.*

6. Batchelor offers another interpretation of what the author points to. It is that one gains a certainty about what is and what is not is not possible, recognising the limitations inherent in being human and dependent on what can be known through one's body and mind (i.e. form and feelings, perceptions, formations, consciousness). Batchelor offers the verses in which the Buddha responds to Kaccanagotta '*...such a one does not get caught up in the habits, fixations, prejudices or biases of the mind...*' as the basis for claiming that the sage is not without views/opinions but that he is not fixated on his views/opinions. Describe an experience of recognising limitation and freed of fixation on your views/opinions. Describe the end of that experience. Can you identify what precipitated the ending of that freedom from fixation?

7. Referencing a phrase from the Pali, 'Emptiness is the dwelling of the great person' Batchelor remarks that emptiness is not something that one strives to

know as the ultimate truth, or the ultimate reality, but emptiness is a solitude, a dwelling, a space in which one dwells or lives. Comment on the meaning of solitude and the absence of solitude that is expressed in the two stanzas:

*The creature concealed inside its cell –
a man sunk in dark passions
is a long, long way from solitude.
Hard is it to let go of what drives us,*

*hard to be free from the wants
that bind us to the thrill of being alive,
hankering for what's gone and to come,
hunger for those delights now – no one else can save you.*

8. On the sutta *On Emptiness*, Batchelor comments that the emptiness evoked is what is lived, or in which one dwells, as opposed to the emptiness that is an object of analysis or investigation. The 'dwelling' is a sequence of meditative states that, in this sutta, begin with the recognition of what is present (beggars, wilderness, earth's expanse) that is succeeded by absorption on the formless or immaterial states (unbounded space, unbounded consciousness, nothing, neither perception nor non-perception) that is succeeded by an unthemed or signless meditation, that is succeeded by freedom, a pure unsurpassed emptiness. The sutta closes with the Buddha's counsel that 'So should you train yourselves: "let us live in this emptiness".' How does the meditation training you are presently engaged in accord with the description in this sutta *On Emptiness*?

9. Were you surprised that the Buddha asserts that following on accomplishment of the sublime meditative states that are succeeded by freedom, there is a remainder, i.e. that which is not empty, the anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields? How do you think it is that one who is freed from the *asavas* or taints (*raga*/cupidity, *bhava*/becoming, *avidya*/nescience) remains *prone to the amount of anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields of a living body*?

Just for fun, here are three other translations of the verse *prone to the amount of anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields of a living body* which we can compare Batchelor's.

1) Piya Tan translates it as:

There is only this much disturbance, namely, that connected with the six sense-bases dependent on this body and conditioned by life.

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/11.3-Cula-Sunnata-S-m121-piya.pdf>

2) Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as:

And there is only this modicum of disturbance: that connected with the six sensory spheres, dependent on this very body with life as its condition.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.121.than.html>

3) Sister Upalavanna translates it as:

There is anxiety on account of life and the body of six mental spheres.

<http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/2Majjhima-Nikaya/Majjhima3/121-culasunnata-e.html>

10. Batchelor suggests that this sutta evidences the Buddha's skilful means in teaching meditation as an 'open field', one that is free of demarcations of paths and stages. Do you find such an absence inspiring, or intimidating, or reassuring, or what?



¶ 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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