

Four frontiers for Buddhism

~ by Winton Higgins • wintonhiggins.org

● **First talk DHARMA BASE CAMP**

This workshop explores the frontiers of Buddhism as we might choose to interpret and practise it in a modern western milieu. A frontier is an unfamiliar place beyond the edges of the familiar world. It lacks known landmarks, it's ambiguous, and it's often where quite different cultures meet. It appeals to our curiosity and sense of adventure; but most of all, we suspect it contains something that might turn out to offer something extremely valuable to us.

Buddhist practice is still relatively new to mainstream western societies, and up to quite recently those of us who've sought to practise it have depended on transplanted Asian traditions and institutions. Our mentors have welcomed us and treated us compassionately in the main, but they hold to beliefs and ways of doing things that we often find implausible and unacceptable.

So some of us would rather see Buddhism sink roots into western culture, thus becoming much more accessible and useful to us who live and breathe that culture. After all, that's what the Chinese and many other non-Indian cultures have done before us.

This choice throws us back onto first principles. If we're going to re-express Buddhism in terms we can work with and make our own, then we have to figure out what it's all about in the first place. Some western Buddhist teachers have been working hard and long to drill down into the core of Buddhism, past all the cultural and institutional encrustations it's acquired in Asia over two and a half millennia.

An excellent example of their work will be published next week: Stephen Batchelor's *After Buddhism: rethinking the dharma from the ground up*. I'll be presenting some of his ideas this weekend.

Note that his main title refers to 'Buddhism', but the subtitle refers to 'the dharma'. What's the difference? Well, 'Buddhism' was a word invented by Europeans in the early 19th century; it was something they'd 'discovered' for themselves on Cook's tours through Asia, and produced their own fantasies about.

Somehow the name stuck – a convenient grab-bag for a bewildering variety of Asian traditions impenetrable to the European mind. Batchelor wants to get beyond this

obfuscation (hence the ‘*after* Buddhism’) and recover the nub of the Buddha’s own teaching, which is called ‘the dharma’. So let’s now call it the dharma, too, and go straight into the beating heart of it.

First teaching: the human condition – the tiger we must learn to ride

If you’ve done Buddhism 101 in school or on the web, you’ll think you know that Buddhism rests on four so-called ‘noble truths’ that the Buddha supposedly declared in his very first teaching:

1. life is suffering;
2. craving is the cause of suffering;
3. the end of suffering is attainable; and
4. the noble eightfold path is the way to end suffering.

We’re off to a poor start here. The Pali text we’ve actually inherited doesn’t say anything of the sort. And in fact, it now appears that the original Pali text didn’t even contain the expression ‘noble truths’ (*ariya saccāni*) at all, let alone any attempt at revelation in propositional, truth-claim form.¹

To the best of our current knowledge, the following outlines what happened and what was said.² After his major awakening experience, the Buddha (as Gotama now calls himself) isn’t sure if he can convey what he’s learned to others. But out of compassion he decides to give it a go anyway.

He chooses an audience of five of his former associates from when he was on a path he subsequently rejected, namely asceticism (self-mortification). So initially they resist what he says, which no doubt forces him to really work on (and experiment with) how to express his new insights into the human condition.

First he tells them he’s found a path of practice – a ‘middle way’ – between two dead ends: *addiction to* pleasure through sensuality, and *addiction to* self-punishment.

We can label them ‘hedonism’ and ‘self-torment’. Both are undignified and unfulfilling, the Buddha says. Hedonism – the obviously more popular dead end – is also ‘low’ and ‘village-like’; while self-punishment is also a bad idea because it’s ‘painful’. Being dead ends, by definition neither leads anywhere; both are states of *stuckness*.

¹ For a discussion of this point, see Stephen Batchelor, ‘A secular Buddhism’, *Journal of Global Buddhism* vol. 13 [2012], pp. 87-107, at pp. 91 et seq. <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/13/batchelor12.pdf>

² *Mahāvagga* I, 6.16-28. In these talks I’ll be following Stephen Batchelor’s translations at http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/media/Stephen/PDF/Stephen_Batchelor-Pali_Canon-Website-02-2012.pdf

By contrast, the middle way – consisting of authentic (or ‘complete’) understanding, thought/intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and mental integration – leads to calming, clarity, awakening, and the reduction of anguish.

Then the Buddha comes to the centrepiece of this first teaching: four central issues a practitioner of the middle way must identify, recognise as workable, and fully plumb. Each turns on a key Pali word:

1. What he calls ***dukkha***. Conventionally it attracts a number of English equivalents: unsatisfactoriness, suffering, stress, distress, anguish etc. – on a scale from the catastrophic to the merely irritating. But the Buddha actually *specifies* what *dukkha* includes, and it’s an interesting list: birth, ageing, sickness, death, contact with whom and what we dislike, separation from whom and what we cherish, not getting what we want, and our general psycho-physical vulnerability. (Let’s note in passing: none of us can avoid anything on this list – these items constitute the inevitable downside of the human condition.)³

We must come to *know dukkha fully*, the Buddha says.

2. ***Arising (samudaya)***, in particular the arising of *craving*. The Buddha characterises craving as ‘repetitive, wallowing in attachment and greed, obsessively indulging in this and that: craving for stimulation, for existence [in certain states], and for non-existence.’ The implication is that we fall into craving as an evasion – instead of an embrace – of the human condition. Instead of dealing with the situation we find ourselves in, we try to escape to an imaginary other one. The unintended consequence of craving is that we add to the trouble we already attract by dint of being human.

The Buddha’s instruction here is: *let go of craving* (which we can read as: *let go of reactivity as such*).

3. ***Ceasing (nirodha)***: ‘the traceless fading away and cessation of that craving [read: reactivity], the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it’. (This *experience* has a name – nirvana ([*nibbāna* in Pali].) ***Experience and savour this ceasing*, the Buddha says.**

4. ***The path (magga)*** with its eight branches noted above, that is, ‘the middle way’. ***Cultivate the path*, the Buddha instructs.**

So here’s the kernel of the Buddha’s teaching, the foundations he would build on during the next 45 years of his teaching career. We need to work with these four

³ In western philosophy, these aspects of the human condition are often boiled down to *time, chance, and death*.

focuses – in each case by (a) identifying it; (b) seeing the possibility of rising to its challenge; and (c) plumbing or cultivating it fully.

In this first teaching, the Buddha goes on to say that, until he became ‘entirely clear’ about these four tasks, he ‘did not claim to have had a peerless awakening’. Perhaps his formulation of this teaching – in order to convince his recalcitrant audience on this occasion – was the crowning achievement of his own spiritual journey so far. Because only now, he says, ‘my mind is unshakeable. There will be no more repetitive existence.’ No more reactivity; no more stuckness.

His words land in the hearts and minds of his five listeners. They *get it*, they’re converts. Their leader, Kondañña, sums up what he’s learned in three words: ‘Whatever arises ceases.’ This takeaway from the teaching has nothing whatever to do with truth-claims. It has to do with how we choose to deal with (or fudge) being-in-the-world as human beings.

In conclusion

Those of you who’ve been introduced to a more conventional Buddhism might find this presentation surprising. Here is a buddha who’s not offering revelations that we couldn’t figure out from our own experience (though he’s pointing our practice in a certain direction, helping us to mine and refine our own experience).

We can get down to work without first signing up to any metaphysical truth-claims at all. He’s not telling us that we suffer because we crave; rather, we suffer because that’s endemic to being-in-the-world (along with joy, and the possibility of awakening, he’ll point out later).

This is the tiger we must learn to ride. The dharma practice he developed is the master class in tiger-riding. Hankering for a ride through life on the tram or in a limo instead will just increase our unease. And he’s not offering to relieve us of our humanity – our being-in-the-world – by whisking us off to a suffering-free heaven realm.

Rather, he’s offering us a helping hand to make the most of *this* world, and *this* vulnerable, human body-mind, by sticking with the real. Whatever arises ceases, remember?

The path of practice he staked out boils down to three interdependent aspects: an ethical life, meditation, and the wisdom we absorb and act out as we work on these aspects of our lives.

What are we today to make of this no-magic-tricks buddha, steeped as we are in our secular culture based on pragmatism, scepticism, evolutionary biology, big-bang cosmology, neuroscience and the rest? Maybe this is a buddha who speaks our language, one we can relate to.

● *Second talk* FRONTIERS 1 & 2: ETHICS AND MEDITATION

As we saw this morning, the four tasks (which Stephen Batchelor sometimes runs together as ‘the fourfold task’) constitute the kernel of the Buddha’s teaching. All aspects of the dharma refer back to them.

They form a feedback loop. The tradition helpfully regroups the eight folds of the path under three heads of practice (‘the three great trainings’) of ethics, meditation and wisdom. How can we adapt and use them today, in our own modern culture and life-world?

Ethics and community

The four tasks rest on an ethic of self-responsibility. They set out how to live well – to make the most of this vulnerable, mortal human life. For starters: avoid wallowing in self-indulgence on the one hand, and beating ourselves up on the other.

Above all, come to grips with the inevitable terms of engagement with this life – including all its difficulties – so avoiding self-centred reactivity (greed, hatred and confusion) and its destructive and self-destructive consequences. Experience and savour moments of total non-reactivity (*nirvana*). Cultivate a way of life that will reinforce this way of being in the world in all its aspects.

In later teachings, the Buddha singled out care (*appamāda*) as the master virtue in leading an ethical life. Just as the footprint of all creatures that walk the earth can fit into the footprint of an elephant, he said, so every virtue we develop can fit comfortably into the ethic of care.

So care was a very big word in Pali (as big as an elephant’s footprint!), just as it’s a very big word in English: think of all the myriad ways we use ‘care’ to refer to the people we love or are concerned about, the way we treat or bring forth the things we think are important, the way we approach our most significant tasks. By the same token, *carelessness* represents ethical failure par excellence. ‘The careless are as already dead,’ the Buddha is quoted as saying.

The five standard Buddhist precepts, in their positive form, express care: universal friendliness, generosity, contentment, truthful communication, and mental lucidity.

Note that this is indeed an *ethic* – an assertion of fundamental values – as opposed to a *morality* (i.e., a set of rules). An ethic challenges our self-responsibility, intelligence and sensitivity, that is, it calls on us to take the responsibility of being moral agents, pursuing outcomes appropriate to our central values.

We can't get by as moral agents simply by following rules. What an ethic demands of us will vary according to our socioeconomic, political and cultural context, and the predicaments we find ourselves in. Hold that thought.

Every ethic worthy of the name is supported by a community. Every practice worthy of the name is supported by a community that upholds and refreshes a living tradition. In the Buddha's tradition, a community of this kind is called a *sangha*.

Originally (and now once again in the modern west), a sangha comprises self-reliant people who want to practice the dharma, and so come together to support each other's practice through fellowship, conversation, and events like this workshop. A sangha needs its own terms of engagement: friendliness, equality, openness and inclusiveness.

Our basic requirement in a sangha is that it welcomes us with equal respect, regardless of our gender, civil status, religion, race, class, sexual preference, and so on. If it's a teacher-centred sangha, then the teacher needs to be carefully checked to make sure s/he has a sense of humour, too.

In many western cities (including this one, I hear), there's a whole range of sanghas to choose from, often with roots in contrasting traditions. Or you can convene your own. Then there are 'virtual' sanghas online. Remember: the word 'community' essentially refers to a process of interaction, not a sociological group. One can experience – and be nourished by – sangha in an online chatroom, or on a retreat or workshop. Wherever people come together to deepen into the dharma.

Meditation: the second great training

Meditation, too, is a communal practice. Thus – to be effective – it needs the support of a sangha which offers encouragement, advice, and the opportunity to compare notes about what is happening in each member's meditation practice.

Meditation enormously increases our capacity for self-reflection, and thereby self-transformation. The Buddha explained the principles of meditation in some detail, not least in his teaching called *The focuses of awareness (Satipatthāna sutta)* – the basis of insight meditation. It's like a detailed map that we can explore and orient ourselves to, as we follow our intimate experience in all its physical, hedonic, emotional and cognitive aspects with growing care.

The one thing the Buddha did not do was set out technical instructions. Meditation has nothing to do with technique, in spite of the common misunderstanding that it's a technical skill – one that we can fail at. You can really only 'fail' at meditation by not doing it.

Many later sub-traditions reduced meditation to formulas – making it a technical exercise (one we could fail at) – long after the Buddha’s death. One of the boons of work around ‘rethinking the dharma from the ground up’ is the recovery of the Buddha’s own non-technical, non-formulaic approach to meditation.

Next month Jason Siff will be in town, presenting his own take on non-formulaic dharmic meditation, which he calls *recollective awareness*. Those of you who accepted my invitation to let go of technique in our sits today will have a taste of what this approach feels like.

Meditation is for sharpening our senses to delve more deeply into our individual direct experience of being-in-the-world, and thereby coming to understand its cause-and-effect dynamics, and so by degrees coming to embrace and negotiate it more skilfully. As we’ve all seen, surely, the flow of human experience is unpredictable, complex and multilayered.

So as not to lose the plot as we try to become aware of all this complexity, the Buddha asks us to account for our direct experience in four areas – roughly: physical; feeling-tone; emotional; and cognitive.

If our attention tends to narrow into one of these areas, we can give ourselves an instruction to check out what is happening in the other three as well, so we enter into our experience more fully and see the whole pattern.

Wisdom: the third great training

In the dharma, wisdom, too, is a practice, but a derivative one – it derives from our *experience* of cultivating our ethical and meditative lives. We don’t find it in the library!

Carefully observing the outcomes of our ethically significant actions teaches us invaluable life skills. As does a gentle, exploratory receptivity towards our unfettered meditation experience. Giving practical effect to (and so reinforcing) what we learn in these two ways goes to the core of the practice of wisdom.

It also goes to the core of a *culture of awakening*, the development of which is another function of participating in a sangha. More on that tomorrow.

● *Third talk* FRONTIERS 3 & 4: FINITUDE AND INTENSITY

You'll notice that the last of Stephen Batchelor's ten theses of secular dharma encourages us 'to nurture a culture of awakening that finds its inspiration in Buddhist and non-Buddhist, religious and secular sources alike'. Yesterday we stayed pretty close to the early dharma teachings. I want to draw modern western ideas with strong affinities to those early teachings. This will take us into frontiers 3 and 4: *finitude*, and *living and practising intensely*.

Finitude

Finitude is a term that entered western philosophical discourse last century. In the first instance it refers to our mortality. We're all going to die, and that's a biggie for us on many levels, from the quite visceral survival instinct, to the profound existential threat we see in death.

But actually, the term 'finitude' refers to more than our mortality: it also includes the mature understanding that our talents, time and energy are limited ('finite'). The vast majority of us will never achieve or become the things we fantasised about in our early years.

Yesterday morning I referred to the central dharmic term *dukkha*, which I called the difficult aspects of the human condition, and which the Buddha specified as *birth, ageing, sickness, death, contact with whom and what we dislike, separation from whom and what we cherish, not getting what we want, and our general psycho-physical vulnerability*.

So while finitude is a modern secular western concept, it's right there in the Buddha's first teaching around 2,400 years ago. *Know it fully*, he insisted. And he meant that *experientially*. It's the first task of a dharma practitioner. It's where the practice begins.

Most religious traditions (including conventional Buddhism) want to relieve us of this burden and run off in the opposite direction. They offer us infinite post-mortem back-up. 'Death is not the end! We're destined to eternal life (or endless rebirths)!' It's a great selling point for religion in general, and for the cash-flows of many of its institutions (including conventional Buddhist ones).

There are exceptions. My favourite is Thomas Cranmer's stark statement in the burial rite in the Anglican *Book of common prayer*:

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower; he *flyeth as it were a shadow*, and never continueth in one stay. *In the midst of life we are in death*.

This statement resonates profoundly with the dharma, and with modern secular wisdom. Death is all around us, it strikes down those closest to us, and we ourselves are never out of its reach.

Martin Heidegger insists that we only live authentically when we keep in mind our *being-towards-death*, our finitude. This awareness must inform how we choose to live, moment to moment. 'Death drives the plot of life.'⁴

Natural science and the secular spirit of our age make it ever harder to suspend disbelief about death's finality, and go with the eternal-life story. But is finitude in itself a bad-news story, or is it an existential challenge?

Is it the key to an authentic life? Is it not a prompt to make the most of *this* life – to take it seriously, to intensify into it? Need finitude be as bleak as Tom Cranmer seems to suggest?

Doesn't the life-after-death story denigrate and deflect from *this* life – what the Buddhist poet Mary Oliver calls our 'one wild and precious life', and asks what we plan to do with it. She ends her intense poem of mourning, *In Blackwater Woods* with these lines:

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

So that leads us to the fourth frontier of Buddhism today:

Intensifying into the everyday sublime

Why might we be tempted to denigrate this life by imagining a better one to come, or by losing ourselves in the repetitive torpor of reactivity which the Buddha asks us to let go of in the second great task of a dharma practitioner?

⁴ Peter Watson's summary of Heidegger on this point, in *The age of atheists: how we have sought to live since the death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 230.

The simple dharmic answer is: because we don't *care* about it enough, and so we don't *pay attention*. It only offers its riches to those who reject jadedness and routine boredom, who pay attention. Here's Mary Oliver, in all her astounding pithiness:

Instructions for living a life.
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

Practising insight meditation is a particularly powerful way to pay attention. But why 'Be astonished'? Because everyday experience – when encountered intensely and directly, with 'beginner's mind' (as zen practitioners say), and not overlain with a thick coat of dusty jadedness – is downright astonishing.

Stephen Batchelor calls everyday experience 'sublime', in the dual sense of beautiful and terrifying (as Edmund Burke did). It's what dharmic meditation is about, he writes:

Meditation originates and culminates in the everyday sublime. I have little interest in achieving states of sustained concentration in which the sensory richness of experience is replaced by pure introspective rapture. I have no interest in reciting mantras, visualising Buddhas or *mandalas*, gaining out-of-body experiences, reading other people's thoughts, practicing lucid dreaming, channelling psychic energies through *chakras*, let alone absorbing my consciousness in the transcendent perfection of the Unconditioned. For me, meditation is about embracing what is happening to this organism as it touches its environment in this moment. I do not reject the experience of the mystical. I only reject the view that the mystical is concealed behind what is merely apparent, that it is anything other than what is occurring in time and space right now. *The mystical does not transcend the world but saturates it.* 'The mystical is not how the world is,' noted Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1921, 'but *that it is*' (*emphasis added*).⁵

Intensity

Some of the incidents in the Pali canon, which contains the earliest teachings, concern a mythical figure called Māra, who personifies our spiritual enemy – carelessness, stuckness. He'd take on the disguise of a well-meaning stranger, approach the Buddha (or one of his best disciples) and suggest a course of action that would paralyse his practice.

⁵ 'The everyday sublime', chapter 3 in Manu Bazzano (ed.) *After mindfulness: new perspectives on psychology and meditation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). See also his *After Buddhism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

On one such occasion, when the Buddha was very old but still practising like the clappers, Māra observed that he'd already achieved so much that, now as his strength was ebbing, he should take it easy. As usual, the Buddha saw right through Māra's disguise and retorted: 'One should practise as if one's hair were on fire!'

Fast forward to our present time, and we find the same advice being handed out by a diverse group of characters who contribute to something called 'the death-of-god' literature. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche observed that 'God is dead', in the sense that the leading European thinkers no longer referred to him as their basic premise. Traditional conceptions of the meaning of life based on religious doctrine and metaphysical beliefs thus became irrelevant, and the meaning of life once more became an open question.

With God, the afterlife, heaven and hell all now ruled out of court, the great writers and thinkers came up with various answers to the question of what's important in *this* life – the only one we have. The one thing they all seem to have agreed about is the supreme value of living intensely, with authenticity, and pursuing ever greater depth and sensitivity. So the enemies of 'the good life' were complacency, triviality, and defensive shallowness.

Heidegger – whose early work resonates deeply with the dharma – added that we need to leaven our intensity with what he called *Gelassenheit* (calm, composure, detachment, release, that is, *letting go*).

Why does all this sound familiar? Because it's right there in the four tasks that the Buddha unfurled in his first teaching. And the meditation practice he opened up for us in the *Satipatthāna sutta* tells us how to go about them.

• *These talks were given during a weekend workshop in Wellington, New Zealand, in October 2015. Winton Higgins has been a Buddhist practitioner since 1987 and a teacher of insight meditation since 1995. A member of The Tuwhiri Project editorial board, he is a senior teacher for Sydney Insight Meditators and Secular Buddhism in Aotearoa New Zealand, and has contributed to the development of secular Buddhism internationally.*

● AFTERNOTE

Some of you asked about the sources and references I used in my talks. The main texts were Peter Watson's *The age of atheists: how we have sought to live since the death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), and Terry Eagleton's *Culture and the death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

For poetry I mainly used Mary Oliver's work, all of it available on the web. I referred mainly to her poems entitled *The journey*, *In Blackwater Woods*, and *When death comes*. I also referred to the burial rite in the Anglican *Book of common prayer*, the original formulation of which was Thomas Cranmer's in 1549; and to Algernon Swinburne's *The garden of Proserpine*.

The long quote from Stephen Batchelor in talk 3 opens his essay, 'The everyday sublime', which is chapter 3 in Manu Bazzano (ed.) *After mindfulness: new perspectives on psychology and meditation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). It will also appear in Stephen's *After Buddhism* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ Press, 2015).

Two other important philosophical references I used were Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap, 2007); and Richard Rorty, *Philosophical papers* vol. 2: *Essays on Heidegger and others* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1991)

Some of you wanted to probe Heidegger a bit more. As I said on the weekend, I can't recommend reading his work directly, as it's such hard going. Rorty's book above will get you into the swing of Heidegger (and much else that is valuable). A good, brief overview comes in the 2nd edition of *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy* pp. 370–3 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1999). This is an entry written by a reliable Heidegger expert, Charles Guignol.

See also Charles Guignol (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger* (2nd edition. New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 2006), which has some good articles on Heidegger. Among them, you might find Charles Taylor's 'Engaged agency and background in Heidegger' particularly useful.

Thank you for your energetic participation on the weekend!

Ten theses of secular dharma

from *After Buddhism: rethinking the dharma from the ground up* by Stephen Batchelor

- 1.** A secular Buddhist is one who is committed to the practice of the dharma for the sake of this world alone.
- 2.** The practice of the dharma consists of four tasks: to embrace suffering,⁶ let go of reactivity, behold the ceasing of reactivity, and cultivate an integrated way of life.
- 3.** All human beings, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, nationality and religion can practice these four tasks. Each person, in each moment, has the potential to be more awake, responsive and free.
- 4.** The practice of the dharma is as much concerned with how one speaks, acts and works in the public realm as with how one performs spiritual exercises in private.
- 5.** The dharma serves the needs of people at specific times and places. Each form the dharma assumes is a transient human creation, contingent upon the historical, cultural, social and economic conditions that generated it.
- 6.** The practitioner honours the dharma teachings that have been passed down through different traditions while seeking to enact them creatively in ways appropriate to the world⁷ as it is now.
- 7.** The community of practitioners is formed of autonomous persons, who mutually support each other in the cultivation of their paths. This network of like-minded individuals respects the equality of all members while honouring the specific knowledge and expertise each person brings.
- 8.** A practitioner is committed to an ethics of care, founded on empathy, compassion and love for all creatures who have evolved on this earth.
- 9.** Practitioners seek to understand and diminish the structural violence of societies and institutions as well as the roots of violence that are present in themselves.
- 10.** A practitioner of the dharma aspires to nurture a culture of awakening that finds its inspiration in Buddhist and non-Buddhist, religious and secular sources alike.

⁶ Think of 'suffering' as the inescapable, more difficult aspects of the human condition.

⁷ Think of the world both as this shared planet, and as the 'life-world' of each one of us.