

Being completely human – secular buddhism, and beyond

An eight-part course using recorded talks by Stephen Batchelor & Roshi Joan Halifax given at Upaya Zen Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, 25 through 29 March 2015

Discussion 4 of 8

Part 6 (49:34) Stephen Batchelor & Joan Halifax: The second great vow

Note the break in the recording, silence followed by people conversing, then more silence, about two thirds of the way through the session

Part 7 (46:21) Stephen Batchelor and Joan Halifax: Q & A

Part 6

1. Had you been there, how would you have responded to Roshi's question about the lectures and the discussions to date: 'What was your edge, what did you learn?'
2. What is the difference between being passive-aggressive and letting go?
3. Roshi comments that practicing the bodhisattva path is not seeking compliance but seeking engagement, the latter being a cause for waking up. Give an example of a turn in your life when you fully comprehended the *dukkha* in a situation and by this embrace (engaging), you let go of the craving (compliance)?
4. In response to the remark of the common tendency to psychologise *dharmic* views into a self-help model or programme, Batchelor firstly asks the rhetorical question 'what would be wrong with self-help?' and secondly remarks that the concern may be that much could be lost in the narrowing of focus of one's dharma practice to a few self-help applications. With respect to the latter concern, with the fourth task being to act (in other words to enter the eightfold path) the overall philosophical and ethical schema of

the dharma, counters such narrowing. Point out parallels to psychological work and any one or more of the path elements: 1) view 2) intention 3) speech 4) action 5) livelihood 6) effort 7) mindfulness 8) *samadhi*.

5. Roshi comments that much of the dharma, as currently taught in the west, is related to 'so called well-being practice' which can entail cultivating wisdom and compassion but also can be solely focused on self-improvement without regard to others. What are the remedies Roshi, Batchelor and the workshop participants offer to counter the conceit that the path is all about oneself?
6. Distinguish the difference between reactivity and responsiveness.
7. The second great vow, usually translated as 'Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them' is reconceptualised by Batchelor as 'Reactivity (the *kleshas*) are inexhaustible; I vow to sever/stop them'. He remarks that this is a point where the dharma parts company from psychotherapy in that reactivity will not be resolved 'if we get the right technique'; that in being fully human, reactivity is a condition that we must come to terms with. The way we do so is by stopping reactivity, consciously opening our hearts and minds to an innate responsiveness. What is your understanding of the reason this vow, this resolve, 'parts company with psychotherapy'?
8. While acknowledging the conventional translation of the second vow as 'to cut' or 'to stop', in working on this interpretation for Upaya Zen Center, Roshi felt that the better choice of term is 'transform'; that 'transform' is more accurate and evocative of process. What is the reasoning Roshi offers?
9. In critiquing the terms, Batchelor remarked that 'letting go' is close to the meaning of transform, which Roshi did not assent to, to which Batchelor replied 'if you think of the four vows as reflexes of the four tasks then the letting go is letting go of something in order to act'. What do you see as the difference between letting go and transforming?

Part 7

1. In reply to the question about the nature of awareness (as synonymous with the practice of mindfulness), Batchelor stated that its cultivation is: ‘the embracing of life’; ‘paying attention to certain features of experience that one tends to overlook’; questioning ‘what is happening rather than always just giving in to one’s opinions’; ‘celebrating not knowing’; in stillness, learning to ‘embody awareness’ and that its practice is ‘a refining, deepening, modifying, sharpening our awareness of who we are, of being in this world with others’. Firstly, provide a definition of awareness or present-moment mindfulness from your own training and secondly, compare these active descriptors with your definition.
2. Roshi characterised awareness/*vipassana* in her tradition as ‘learning how to ride the waves of birth and death ... we become more accustomed to the changes that inevitably happen ... the experience of uncertainty ... not getting someplace better but being wherever you are with a sense of interest, or curiosity, or openness’. She invites participants to contemplate the awareness that we may or may not embody when facing our own deaths. In upcoming sitting periods, at least twice, complete the contemplation Roshi advises. What was your experience?
3. Batchelor, having done the contemplation that Roshi advised participants do on ‘letting go’ versus ‘transformation’, he concluded that letting go is transformation. He reasons that is so because stopping, breaking, or cutting reactivity makes transformation possible. When asked for a definition of transformation, Roshi gave offered an analogy made by Suzuki Roshi in *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind* (copied below). How would you describe letting go as the basis for transformation using this analogy?

To give your sheep or cow a large spacious meadow is the way to control him. To live in the realm of Buddha nature means to die as a small being, moment after moment. When we lose our balance we die, but at the same time we also develop ourselves, we grow. Whatever we see is changing, losing its balance. The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony. This is how

everything exists in the realm of Buddha nature, losing its balance against a background of perfect balance.

4. Considering the 84,000 collections of *dharmas*, even if you know just two or three of the 84,000, could you argue that in your day-to-day life you do, at times, make a distinction between letting go and transforming? If so, provide an example.

5. In response to the questioner asking about courage in letting go, Roshi repeated her teacher's advice. Tetsugen Bernie Glassman advised that one should live in 'not knowing' by cutting through conceptual narrative, i.e. our explanatory systems. Firstly, any comment on Roshi's phrasing likening this not knowing to wielding Manjushri's sword, the sword exemplifying cutting through conceptual narrative? Secondly, does this not knowing either as a practice and/or a way of being outside of formal practice, appeal to you? If so, why? If not, why not?