

Buddhism Without Beliefs?

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Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening

By Stephen Batchelor

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WHY DOES ONE WRITE BOOK REVIEWS? This was the question that occurred to me recently, when I resumed writing them after an interval of several years.

On reflection I concluded that one engaged in this minor form of literary activity principally for four reasons. In the first place, through a review one can draw attention to a book that might otherwise be undeservedly neglected. Then one can point out particular beauties in a work, especially if it is a work of imagination, in this way not only delighting in those beauties oneself but perhaps being the cause of others delighting in them too. Again, reviewing a book enables one to correct factual inaccuracies, expose muddled thinking, and challenge onesided views. Finally, by obliging one to engage closely with the product of another mind, writing a review helps one to clarify and refine, even to modify, one's own ideas.

Most of these reasons entered into my decision to review *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, of whose appearance on the scene I was made aware through excerpts published in the Spring 1997 issue of *Tricycle*, the American Buddhist review. As I later discovered, these excerpts were taken from three sections [6] of the book, sections headed, respectively, Agnosticism, Imagination, and Culture, the lengthiest being taken from the first section. With certain elements in Batchelor's thinking I found myself very much in agreement, for instance his insistence on the importance of the agnostic imperative in Buddhism and his contention that dharma practice was more akin to artistic creation than technical problem solving. I therefore procured a copy of the book from which the *Tricycle* excerpts had been taken. Unfortunately, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* proved to be something of a disappointment. To begin with, it was a slim volume of 127 pages including ten pages of Sources and Notes, whereas I had expected a more substantial work. That it was only a slim volume was no accident, as I afterwards realised. Moreover, the author ... But to give reasons for my disappointment is in effect to start reviewing the book, and since it is best to proceed systematically, I shall look at (i) those points in it that are acceptable and (ii) those that are unacceptable, (iii) examine Batchelor's idea of a belief-free, agnostic Buddhism in detail, (iv) offer a few general observations, and (v) ask myself what I have learned from the exercise.

The work consists of fifteen short essays divided into three groups. The first group, collectively entitled Ground, contains essays on, respectively, Awakening, Agnosticism, Anguish, Death, Rebirth, Resolve, Integrity, and Friendship; in the second, entitled Path, essays on Awareness, Becoming, Emptiness, and Compassion, while the third, entitled Fruition, contains essays on Freedom, Imagination and Culture. In looking both at the points that can be accepted and those that are unacceptable, rejoicing in the former and deploring the latter, I shall deal with them in the order in which they occur in the book. Obviously I shall not be able to deal with all such points, or even to deal with each essay individually. I shall try, however, to cover all the points that to me seem important.

(i)

BATCHELOR BEGINS AT THE BEGINNING, going back to Siddhartha Gautama's awakening (as he calls it, instead of the more usual Enlightenment) and to his giving, as the Buddha, his first discourse, delivered to his five former ascetic companions in the Deer Park at Sarnath, near Benares. This is where many [7] expositions of Buddhism begin; but Batchelor, in addition to summarising the discourse, draws attention to the fact that each of the four ennobling truths (as he calls them) of Anguish, its origins, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, which together form the core of the discourse, requires being acted upon in its own particular way. Anguish has to be *understood*, its origins have to be *let go of*, its cessation has to be *realised*, and the path leading to its cessation has to be *cultivated*. Thus 'Buddhism' (the inverted commas being Batchelor's) suggests a course of action; the four truths are challenges to act. Though more Buddhists may be aware of the distinction between the first discourse's four ways of action than our author thinks, his emphasis on the importance of action certainly deserves to be taken seriously by all Buddhists. As Professor Richard F. Gombrich has recently pointed out, albeit from within a different perspective, karma or 'Action', in the word's primary sense of morally relevant action, lies at the heart of the Buddha's world view;¹ such action being, as he goes on to point out, not only physical and vocal but also mental. Though Batchelor nowhere mentions Going for Refuge, Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is likewise an action – the central, definitive act of the Buddhist life, by virtue of which one is a follower of the Buddha. It is in fact as a direct consequence of our Going for Refuge, after 'hearing' the Buddha-word, that we seek to understand, to let go of, to realise, and to cultivate. Thus karma in the sense of morally relevant action, and the act of Going for Refuge, can in truth no more be separated from the first discourse's four actions than these can be separated from one another. Together they form 'an interwoven complex of truths' (p.4) even richer than the one envisaged by Batchelor.

As I have noted, Batchelor speaks of the four *ennobling* truths rather than of the four *noble* truths (the usual translation of *arya-satya*.) This enables him to speak of the Buddha's experience of these truths as ennobling, so that awakening granted to his life a natural dignity, integrity, and authority, and this in its turn enables him to distinguish between authority which is natural and non-coercive and that which consists in imposing our will on others 'either through manipulation and intimidation or by appealing to the opinions of those more powerful than ourselves' (p.6). The distinction is an important one, and in view of the widespread modern habit of lumping true authority to-[8]gether with false and rejecting both he could well have said more about it. Though unfortunately he does not do this, at least he recognises that there are degrees of awakening, thereby implicitly also recognising that there are degrees of ennoblement and, therefore, degrees of true authority. In other words, there is a spiritual *hierarchy* – a hierarchy of degrees of awakening or ennoblement or true authority – and this hierarchy is a true hierarchy, as opposed to the false or at least conventional hierarchy based on earthly power and worldly position. Batchelor appears not to see this, though it follows from the distinction he himself draws between the two kinds of authority, for on the page immediately preceding the one where he speaks of degrees of awakening he uses the word hierarchy in a pejorative sense that suggests he lumps true hierarchy together with false hierarchy in the same simplistic manner that people lump together true and false authority (pp.11 and 12).

Awakening is an individual matter, and Buddhism declined as fewer and fewer Buddhists succeeded in achieving this state. Batchelor in effect attributes the decline to increased monasticisation and he may well be right, at least to an extent. He is certainly right when he points

out that the traditional explanation for the decay of the religion relies on the Indian idea of the 'degeneration of time', as he calls it, a notion that regards the course of history as a process of inexorable decline. 'According to this notion, those who lived at the time of the Buddha were simply less degenerate, more "spiritual", than the corrupted man of humanity today' (p.12). Batchelor does not enlarge on the topic, but in its Buddhistic form as the doctrine of the three periods of the Dharma – the period of the True Dharma, the period of the Image (or Counterfeit) Dharma, and the period of the Destruction of the Dharma, in which we are now living – the idea of the 'degeneration of time' influenced the course of the Far Eastern Buddhism profoundly. Yet though the consciousness of living in the Dark Age of Buddhism precipitated doctrinal and spiritual developments of enormous importance, in my view there can be little doubt that the notion of an *inevitable* decline of Buddhism is inconsistent with both the spirit and the letter of the Buddha's teaching. Social and political conditions admittedly may be less (or more) supportive of the practice of the Dharma at one period, or in one place, than another, but *intrinsically* it is no more difficult to practise it now than it was in the past. The idea of the 'degeneration of time', [9] and therewith the doctrine of the three periods of the Dharma, is one that can have no place in Western Buddhism. Likewise there can be no place in Western Buddhism for the inverted form of the idea, according to one popular version of which, humanity having entered the Age of Aquarius, spiritual progress will henceforth be collective and automatic.

Since Batchelor's idea of a belief-free, agnostic Buddhism will be examined later, I shall not look now at those points in his essay on Agnosticism that I find acceptable. The next two essays, on Anguish (the term Batchelor uses when referring to *dukkha* as personal experience of the kind of suffering caused by self-centred craving) and on Death, do not require much in the way of comment. Both strike a meditative note. In the first he takes the reader through a simple exercise in respiration-mindfulness and in the second through a meditation on death. The guidance he offers here is obviously based on personal experience and moreover is framed, in both cases, by heartfelt reflections that from time to time crystallise into aphorisms that are themselves appropriate subjects for reflective meditation. Not only do we try to forget the idea that the only certainty in life is that it will end, but 'Everyone collaborates in everyone else's forgetting' (p.22). Similarly, 'Evasion of the unadorned immediacy of life is as deep-seated as it is relentless', so that 'Even with the ardent desire to be aware and alert in the present moment, the mind flings us into tawdry and tiresome elaborations of past and future' (p.25). Batchelor also reminds us, in connection with Siddhartha's encounter with the four sights, that when the questioner realises that he himself is the question, such a question is a mystery, not a problem, and that 'It cannot be "solved" by meditation techniques, through the authority of a text, upon submission to the will of a guru' (pp.26–27). Other aphorisms are 'Reflective meditation is a way of translating thoughts into the language of feeling' and 'How extraordinary it is to be here at all' (p.32), the second of which put me in mind of Spinoza's wonderment at the fact that there should be anything rather than nothing. Less aphoristic, but equally true and no less worthy of reflective meditation, is a sentence that comes towards the end of the essay on death: 'To meditate on the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its time helps transform the experience of another's death from an awkward discom-[10]forture into an awesome and tragic conclusion to the transience that lies at the heart of all life' (p.33).

The essay on Rebirth opens with the declaration 'Religions are united not by belief in God but by belief in life after death' (p.34). Buddhism, of course, teaches rebirth, and Batchelor recognises that the Buddha himself accepted the idea and found this 'prevailing Indian view' (p.35) sufficient as a basis for his ethical and liberating teaching. Although he taught dharma² practice to be meaningful whether or not we believe in rebirth (a quotation to this effect from the Pali Canon

prefaces the essay), the evidence does not suggest that he held an agnostic view on the matter. Is it then true that, as often claimed, you cannot be a Buddhist if you do not accept the doctrine of rebirth? Batchelor is aware that, from a traditional point of view, it is indeed problematic to suspend belief in the idea of rebirth, since many basic notions then have to be rethought, 'But if we follow the Buddha's injunction not to accept things blindly, then orthodoxy should not stand in the way of forming our own understanding' (p.36). Orthodoxy and blind belief, it would seem, are synonymous! Not that the idea of rebirth presents no difficulties. Unfortunately Batchelor drags across the trail the old red herring of the alleged incompatibility of the idea of rebirth and the central Buddhist idea that there is no eternal self. However, he is right when he points out that the mere fact of rebirth does not entail any ethical linkage between one existence and the next. He is also right in pointing out that 'While the Buddha accepted the idea of karma as he accepted that of rebirth, when questioned on the issue he tended to emphasise its psychological rather than its cosmological implications. "Karma", he often said, "is intention": i.e. a movement of the mind that occurs each time we think, speak, or act' (p.37). Though Batchelor does not actually tell us this, the fact that karma is *cetanā* implies that skilful actions are to be performed not so much because they will result in a good rebirth (the cosmological reason) as because they will help us understand, let go of, realise, and cultivate (the psychological reason). What he does however tell us, and very rightly, is that the Buddha 'denied that karma alone was sufficient to explain the origin of individual experience' (p.37).

The point is an extremely important one; so important I wish Batchelor had enlarged upon it, the more especially as he makes it clear that the Buddha's [11] denial that karma alone suffices to explain the origin of individual experience is in contrast to 'the view often taught by religious Buddhists' (p.37). Who these religious Buddhists are he does not say (in his vocabulary 'religious Buddhists' means, apparently, those Buddhists who are not agnostic Buddhists), but they certainly include those Tibetan lamas and their disciples who, as I know from personal experience, not only teach but strongly, even vehemently, insist that karma alone is sufficient to explain the origin of individual experience. In the words of an eminent Gelugpa lama, '*All happiness and suffering is the exclusive result of our individual karmic deeds created through past lives*' (my italics).³ He could hardly have expressed himself more clearly. The Buddha was no less clear. There are at least three passages in the Sutta-Pitaka of the Pali Canon in which he speaks of the various *non*-karmic factors in human experience, and in one of these, addressing the Wanderer Sivaka of the Top-Knot, he explicitly rejects the view of those recluses and brahmins who, like the Tibetan lamas and their disciples, hold that 'whatsoever pleasure or pain or mental state a human being experiences, all that is due to a previous act.' Holding such a view, he declares, 'they go beyond personal experience and what is generally acknowledged by the world. Wherefore do I declare those recluses and brahmins to be in the wrong.'⁴

Though it might seem that there are only two options, either to believe in rebirth or not, Batchelor is convinced there is a third: to acknowledge, in all honesty, *I do not know*. If it is a question of either knowing or not knowing *in the absolute sense* then, clearly, we do not know and should admit it. Such acknowledgement is not incompatible with a *provisional* belief in rebirth as the more reasonable of the two options (or of the three, if we include the Christian and Muslim option of post-mortem but not pre-natal existence). Nonetheless Batchelor's emphasis on the desirability of agnosticism in connection with the question of rebirth is a welcome one; especially when one considers the kind of fantasies in which some religious Buddhists, as he calls them, have indulged in this regard.

Also welcome is his emphasis, in the essays on Resolve and Integrity, on the fact that Dharma practice can embrace a range of purposes (all subordinate to the supreme purpose, awakening) and on the fact that ethical integrity is rooted in empathy. Thus at times we may concentrate on ‘creating a liveli-[12]hood that is in accord with our deepest values and aspirations. At times we may retreat: disentangling ourselves from social and psychological pressures in order to reconsider our life in a quiet and supportive setting. At times we may engage with the world: responding empathetically and creatively to the anguish of others’ (p.42). Though Batchelor himself does not draw the conclusion, such a position tends to undermine the monk-layman dichotomy: at one time in our Buddhist life we may be living more as a monk, at another more as a layman. More specifically, at different times, and for longer or shorter periods, we may be working in a team-based right livelihood business, enjoying a solitary retreat, raising funds for a third world social project, teaching meditation, or writing a book on the Dharma. As for his emphasis on the fact that integrity is rooted in empathy, Batchelor reminds us that it requires courage and intelligence as well, because every significant ethical choice entails risk, since we cannot know in advance the consequences of the choices we make and have to learn from concrete mistakes. He also reminds us that ethical enquiry is not the same thing as moral certainty and that ‘While moral conditioning may be necessary for social stability, it is inadequate as a paradigm for integrity’ (p.48).

But welcome as are his emphases on resolve and integrity, still more welcome is Batchelor’s assertion that dharma practice is embodied in friendship, and that ‘Our practice is nourished, sustained, and challenged through ongoing contact with friends and mentors who seek to realise the Dharma in their own lives’ (p.49). Despite the fact that the Buddha stressed the importance of spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa-mitratā*), even declaring it to be the whole of the holy life (*brahmacarya*),⁵ books on Buddhism rarely mention the subject, and it is therefore all the more heartening to find Batchelor devoting an entire essay to it. Besides singing the praises of friendship, and emphasising its significance and value, he points out that the forms of Buddhist friendship have changed over history and that today a new model may be needed. He is very much alive to the fact that true friendship can be compromised by issues of power, and warns ‘We should be wary of being seduced by charismatic purveyors of Enlightenment.’ Our true friends ‘seek not to coerce us, even gently and reasonably, into believing what we are unsure of. These friends are like midwives, who draw forth what is waiting to be born’ (pp.50–51). [13]

Like the essays on Anguish and Death, those on Awareness, Becoming, and Emptiness strike a meditative note, as Batchelor leads us through an exercise in the expansion of awareness, a reflection on the five primary factors of mental life, and a contemplation of the fact that things are devoid of intrinsic, separate being. In course of so doing he reminds us that ‘To meditate is not to empty the mind and gape at things in a trancelike stupor’ (apparently a point that still needs to be made) and that ‘emptiness’, which he admits is a confusing term, although used as an abstract noun ‘does not in any way denote an abstract thing or state’ (pp.64–65 and 81). The essay on compassion introduces us to a variant of the *mettā-bhāvanā* or ‘development of (universal) loving kindness’ practice which Batchelor rightly sees not just as a separate exercise but also as a means to developing mindfulness and loosening the grip of self-centredness. ‘Insight into emptiness and compassion for the world’, he reminds us, ‘are two sides of the same coin’ (p.88). But there are dangers. The exaggeratedly altruistic person may come to think of himself as the saviour of others, thus risking messianic and narcissistic inflation.

Freedom – spiritual freedom, the freedom of awareness – is of the essence of Buddhism, and it is not surprising that Batchelor should devote space to the subject. His essay on Freedom is not so much an essay on it as a paean to it, and we are left with a sense of exhilaration at the prospect of

our being free *from* confusion and craving, free to realise our creative potential, and free to be *for* others. What perhaps *is* surprising is that the last two essays in *Buddhism Without Beliefs* should be devoted to Imagination and Culture. Studies of the Buddhist, or at least the Buddhistic, culture of this or that 'Buddhist' country are not unknown, but to devote an entire section of a book on Buddhism to the subject of imagination is to my knowledge unprecedented – and very welcome. Batchelor sees imagination as the faculty through which authentic vision finds expression in concrete and vivid forms. For him, therefore, 'Dharma practice is more akin to artistic creation than technical problem solving' (p.103), as I noted at the beginning. 'The technical dimension of dharma practice (such as training to be more mindful and focused) is comparable to the technical skills a potter must learn in order to become proficient in his craft. Both may require many years of discipline and hard work' (p.103). The potter's raw material is clay. Similarly, The raw material of Dharma [14] practice is *ourselves* and our world, which are to be understood and transformed according to the vision and values of the dharma itself' (p.103). Moreover as soon as imagination is activated in the process of awakening, the natural beauty of the world is vividly enhanced and our appreciation of the arts enriched. Great works of art in fact succeed in capturing both the pathos of anguish and a vision of its resolution, while the Buddha's four ennobling truths themselves provide us with 'not only a paradigm of cognitive and affective freedom but a template of aesthetic vision' (pp.105–106). Batchelor does not go so far as to describe the Buddha himself as an artist (though he might well have done), but he does say of him that his genius lay in his imagination. 'He succeeded in translating his vision not only into the language of his time but into terms sufficiently universal to inspire future generations in India and beyond. His ideas have survived in much the same way as great works of art. While we may find certain stylistic elements of this teaching alien, his central ideas speak to us in a way that goes beyond their reference to a particular time or place. But unlike ancient statues from Egypt or Gandhara, the wheel of dharma set in motion by the Buddha continued to turn after his death, generating ever new and startling cultures of awakening' (p.107).

Such a culture of awakening is forged, according to Batchelor, from the tension between an indebtedness to the past and a responsibility to the future. We have to distinguish between what is central in the Buddhist tradition and what peripheral, between elements vital for the survival of Dharma practice and alien artifacts that might obstruct that survival. Nor can a culture of awakening exist independently of the specific social, religious, artistic, and ethnic cultures in which it is embedded. Resisting creative interaction with those cultures, Dharma practice today could end up as a marginalised subculture, a beautifully preserved relic. On the other hand, through losing its inner integrity and critical edge it could end being swallowed up by something else, such as psychotherapy or contemplative Christianity. In any case, a culture of awakening – a culture in which the Buddha's eightfold path is cultivated – is always an expression of a community. 'Community is the living link between individuation and social engagement. A culture of awakening simply cannot occur without being rooted in a coherent and vital sense of community, for a matrix of friendships is the very soil in which dharma practice is cultivated' [15] (p.114). At this point I started wondering where I had heard it all before, and just where I had seen the idea of a culture of awakening being translated into action. But that is another story. Like the essays on Agnosticism, Friendship, and Imagination, that on Culture is something of a departure and therefore deserves, like them, to be given serious consideration by Western Buddhists.

(ii)

BEING ABLE TO AGREE with a respected fellow Buddhist is pleasant, having to disagree with him is painful. When one has looked at those points in *Buddhism Without Beliefs* that are acceptable, and rejoiced in them, it is with reluctance that one turns to those points that are unacceptable and that have, therefore, to be deplored and rejected. For this reason I shall touch on only some of the more significant of these latter points which, fortunately, are few in number. In any case, my principal disagreement with Batchelor is in connection with his advocacy of a belief-free, agnostic Buddhism, and with this I shall deal separately later.

If it is true that 'Religions are united not by belief in God but by belief in life after death' (p.34), then it follows that they are united by the belief that consciousness – for want of a better term – is separate from the physical body and can exist independently of it. Similarly, if consciousness exists independently of the body, it follows that it cannot be explained in terms of brain function. To believe that it can be so explained is materialism, just as to believe the contrary is idealism or at least immaterialism. Batchelor appears to believe that consciousness *can* be explained in terms of brain function. At least he dismisses the notion that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of brain function as an 'article of faith' adopted on account of 'ancient Indian metaphysical theories' (p.37). It is odd, he thinks, that a practice concerned with anguish and the ending of anguish should be obliged to accept these ancient theories and, along with them, the article of faith in question. But if the belief that consciousness cannot be explained in terms of brain function is an article of faith, the belief that it *can* be so explained is no less so, inasmuch as the brain of which consciousness is supposedly an epiphenomenon is 'material' and belief in the existence of 'matter' is as much an article of faith as belief in the existence of 'spirit'. Since Batchelor dismisses the notion that [16] consciousness cannot be explained in terms of brain function, it is not surprising to find him rejecting 'a transcendent absolute in which ultimate meaning is secured' and insisting 'Dharma practice starts not with a belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world' (p.40). Dharma practice may indeed begin in this way (though how one 'embraces' anguish is not clear); but this does not mean that it cannot begin in any other way. *Logically* speaking it begins with the 'existence' of what may be described as a transcendent Absolute, for as the Buddha declares in the *Udāna* 'There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncomounded; if there were not, there would be known no escape here from the born, become, made, compounded' (i.e. there would be no ending of anguish).⁶ Batchelor also insists 'Dharma practice can never be in contradiction with science', since the former's concern 'lies entirely with the nature of existential experience' (p.37). But if consciousness can be explained in terms of brain function, and if the physical organism is indeed 'capable of consciousness' when in the course of evolution it reaches a certain degree of complexity (p.29), then it would seem that inasmuch as existential experience is unthinkable apart from consciousness such experience is, like consciousness itself, the concern of science rather than religion, so that there is nothing left for Dharma practice to concern itself with. Here Buddhism is subsumed under science, and 'dharma practice' becomes no more than an applied science. Probably Batchelor would not agree that such was the case, but none the less it is what appears to follow from certain of his assumptions. Moreover, he is convinced that 'One of the great realisations of the [18th century] Enlightenment was that an atheist materialist could be just as moral as a believer – even more so' (p.35). But if an atheistic materialist can be moral, then on the basis of his reasoning it should be possible for a materialist scientist – one who by definition shares Batchelor's rejection of a transcendent Absolute

– not only to practise what in effect is the Dharma but to practise it without ceasing to be a materialist.

When discussing friendship Batchelor rightly points out that our true friends do not seek to coerce us, and that it is possible for friendship to be compromised by issues of power (pp.50–51, 53). In other words true friends do not seek to exercise power over us, and perhaps do not even consider [17] themselves as being morally possessed of such power. Here power is equated with coercion or the exercise of force or authority without regard to the wishes or desires of the person or persons who are its object. This is the sense in which I use the term when I speak of the power mode as contrasted with the love mode, as I call them, and maintain that power has no place within the sangha or spiritual community and that members of the sangha or spiritual community relate to one another solely in accordance with the love mode. So far all is clear and there would seem to be no disagreement between Batchelor and me. However, towards the end of the essay on Friendship he speaks of the possibility of imagining a community of friendships in which diversity is celebrated rather than censured, smallness of scale regarded as success rather than failure, and in which ‘power is shared by all rather than invested in a minority of experts’ (p.54). Here power is clearly power in the sense of coercion. That this is the case is indicated by the fact that only a few lines back he says ‘true friendship has tended to be compromised by issues of power’ and before that ‘true friends seek not to coerce us’ – thus equating power and coercion. In speaking of the possibility of a community of friendships in which ‘power is shared by all rather than invested in a minority of experts’ he is therefore speaking of the possibility of one in which force or authority is exercised not by a few over the rest but by everybody over everybody, which is absurd, unless it is to be exercised not internally but externally, i.e. over a person or persons not belonging to the community. Batchelor has in fact imposed on his community of friendships a ‘democratic’ constitution, complete with equal rights for all, without considering whether this form of constitution is the appropriate one for a spiritual community. He has also failed to see that the idea of power being shared by all is inconsistent with his earlier recognition that there are degrees of awakening and ennoblement, and therefore of authority, for if there are degrees of authority (whether coercive or non-coercive) there are, correspondingly also degrees of power, and if some have more power than others then power cannot be said to be shared, i.e. equally shared, by all. The difficulty is partly due to the fact that Batchelor nowhere defines power, or tells us in what sense (or senses) he uses the term, thus ignoring a contemporary philosopher’s warning that ‘it is disastrous to talk of power without first engaging in an analytical exercise of some complexity’.⁷

Two of the points on which I disagree with Batchelor relate to the Path, disagreements regarding which are a serious matter, pertaining as they do to the very means by which Enlightenment or Nirvana is to be achieved. Both these points arise in connection with the cultivation of awareness. Having spoken of awareness, in the sense of stopping and paying attention to what is happening in the moment, as ‘a very reasonable definition of meditation’, Batchelor goes on to describe it as ‘a process of deepening self-acceptance’ (p.59). The first point is by far the more unacceptable of the two and hence the more decisively to be rejected, ignoring as it does all higher spiritual experience. Stopping and paying attention to what is happening in the moment may be a reasonable definition of mindfulness or awareness (*sati*), which is indeed an important practice, but is totally inadequate as a definition of meditation (*samādhi*), which besides mindfulness or awareness includes the eight *vimokṣas* or ‘emancipations’ and the nine *samāpattis* or ‘attainments’. Without a full experience of these higher states awakening is incomplete, though of course there can be degrees of meditative experience even as there can be degrees of awakening. That such is the

case is clear from what the Buddha, speaking to Ananda, says of his own attainment of Enlightenment:

And so long, Ananda, as I attained not to, emerged not from these nine attainments of gradual abidings, both forwards and backwards, I realised not completely, as one wholly awakened, the full perfect awakening, unsurpassed in the world with its gods, Maaras and Brahmaas, on earth with its recluses, godly men, devas and men; but when I attained to and emerged from these abidings suchwise, then, wholly awakened, I realised completely the full perfect awakening unsurpassed ...⁸

In reducing meditation to stopping and paying attention to what is happening in the moment Batchelor is in effect precluding the possibility of Enlightenment. Such reductionism is not uncommon in Buddhist circles today and was not unknown in the past. As Professor Richard F. Gombrich has recently shown in *How Buddhism Began*, in a fascinating chapter entitled 'Retracing an Ancient Debate: How Insight Worsted Concentration in the Pali Canon', the ambiguity of the term *paññā* or insight led to a differentiation between release by both insight and meditation (the kind of release exempli-[19]fied and taught by the Buddha) and release by insight alone. This led to the development of the idea that Enlightenment could be attained without meditation (i.e. without any experience of the *samāpattis*), simply by means of *paññā* in the sense of a process of intellectual analysis.⁹ Batchelor's affinities would seem to lie with the modern representatives of this kind of development. Just as they emphasise *vipassanā* or insight in the intellectual sense at the expense of *samatha* or calm, similarly he reduces meditation to stopping and paying attention to what is happening in the moment. The result in both cases is the elimination of meditation in the normative Buddhist sense.

'Self-acceptance' is one of the catch phrases of Californian psychobabble, and it is a pity to see a respected Buddhist like Batchelor falling victim to this usage and to its underlying ideology. Not only is awareness 'a process of deepening self-acceptance' (p.59) but 'There is nothing unworthy of acceptance' (p.59). Indeed, awareness 'embraces' whatever it observes, though Batchelor at least warns us, rather confusingly, that to embrace a mental state like hatred does not mean to indulge it but to accept it for what it is (p.60). The root of the confusion, and thus of the wrong view and wrong practice which that confusion entails, is a misuse of the word 'accept', which means: 'To take with pleasure; to receive kindly; to admit with approbation' (*Johnson*); 'To receive with favour; to approve' (*Webster*); 'To tolerate or accommodate oneself to ... to receive with approval' (*Collins*); 'regard with favour' (*Concise Oxford*). Johnson in fact, after giving his definition of 'accept', makes the precise meaning of the word perfectly clear by adding, with his usual perspicacity, 'It is distinguished from *receive*, as *specific* from *general*; noting a particular manner of receiving.' Thus it is obvious that there can be no question of a Buddhist, least of all a Buddhist meditator, ever regarding the unskilful mental state of hatred (to take Batchelor's example) with pleasure, or approval, or toleration, or favour. For Buddhism it is axiomatic that hatred, like all other unskilful mental states, is to be rejected, even though in most cases the rejection will admittedly be a gradual process rather than instantaneous. So axiomatic is it that actual quotations from the scriptures are hardly needed, and it is perhaps sufficient simply to refer to the *Dhammapada*'s 'Kodhavagga' or Chapter on Anger and to the references and citations in the Pali Text's Society's Pali-English Dictionary under 'Kodha'. The proper at-[20]titude to unskilful mental states, as well as to unskilful speech and unskilful bodily action, is not acceptance but awareness in the sense of recognition (i.e. recognition of the fact of their unskilfulness), followed by the taking of measures to rid oneself of those states. In the case of skilful mental states, speech,

and bodily action, awareness will be followed by measures to cultivate and develop them. All this is clear from the Buddha's teaching of Right Effort (*samyak-vyāyāma*), the sixth factor of the Eightfold Path, which is fourfold, consisting in the effort to prevent the arising of unarisen unskilful qualities; to suppress arisen unskilful qualities; to develop unarisen skilful qualities; and to maintain arisen skilful qualities. Here there is no talk of the unskilful being 'accepted' or 'embraced'. Dharma practice involves not a weak, and probably indulgent, 'self-acceptance', but an unflinching self-knowledge that recognises both one's strengths and one's weaknesses and which, while accepting and encouraging the former, no more hesitates to reject the latter than a man who, in the traditional comparison, finding a dead snake round his neck hesitates to fling it off.

My remaining points of disagreement with Batchelor, apart from those connected with his advocacy of a belief-free agnostic Buddhism, are two in number, and since they relate to topics on which he touches only lightly I shall deal with them briefly, even though each of them represents the tip of an ideological iceberg of enormous dimensions. Concluding his essay on Compassion, which he rightly describes as the heart and soul of awakening, Batchelor says: 'It becomes abundantly clear that we cannot attain awakening for ourselves: we can only participate in the awakening of life' (p.90). With the first half of the sentence I have no quarrel, but what is this *awakening of life*? The phrase suggests a *collective* attainment of Enlightenment, in which the individual participates by virtue of the fact that 'life', as represented by humanity as a whole, has reached a higher stage of evolution. Here Batchelor appears to have fallen victim, at least momentarily, to that particular strain of New Age thinking according to which the Age of Aquarius is upon us and we shall all ride to Enlightenment on the crest of an evolutionary wave. Such thinking is inconsistent with his own rejection, in the essay on Awakening, of the Indian idea of the 'degeneration of time', an idea of which the New Age notion of automatic spiritual progress for everyone is the 'positive' counter-[21]part. The second of these two remaining points of disagreement is not dissimilar to the first. In the essay on Freedom Batchelor speaks of awakening as 'the awesome freedom into which we were born but for which we have substituted the pseudo-independence of a separate self' (p.99). Into which *we were born*? The phrase suggests either that freedom is our *destiny* (cf. 'the man born to be King'), in which case it is redolent of New Age ideology, or that we as infants are born free and awake and only later, when we have learned to speak and say 'I', develop a separate self, in which case the phrase is suggestive of a Rousseauistic, or a Wordsworthian, idealisation of infancy as a state of innocence and purity and the child as not only 'best Philosopher' but 'best Buddhist'.

(iii)

EASTERN BUDDHISTS, and Western Buddhists to the extent that they are followers of this or that form of Eastern Buddhism, often give their assent to propositions for which there is no proof. They assent to such propositions either because they are to be found in the scriptures or because they encounter them in the teachings of their own lama or guru. Some are of a 'scientific' nature, relating as they do to such areas of modern knowledge as history, geography, and astronomy, and of these propositions some, again, have not only not been proved true but have been shown to be demonstrably false. We now know that the Buddha was not born in 1030 BCE, that the earth is not flat, and that the sun and moon do not revolve round Mount Meru. Batchelor's 'agnostic Buddhist' is therefore perfectly right in not regarding the Dharma as a source of 'answers' to what are really scientific questions and right in seeking such knowledge 'in the appropriate domains' (p.18). This is no more than what all Buddhists should do. At the same time, we must be careful just where we

draw the line between the respective spheres of Buddhism, correctly understood, and the different sciences. Batchelor says of the agnostic Buddhist that he is not a 'believer' with claims to 'revealed information about supernatural and paranormal phenomena' (p.18). This is rather too sweeping, for we must be open to the possibility of there being phenomena which are inexplicable in scientific terms, though some scientists may, of course, *believe* that science will be in a position to explain them one day. [22]

Batchelor's agnostic Buddhist is also perfectly right in founding his agnostic stance on 'a passionate recognition that *I do not know*' (p.19). This is a recognition that is badly needed in many parts of the Buddhist world, where only too often 'infallible' lamas and 'omniscient' gurus think they know when in fact they merely believe, and therefore I hope that agnosticism *in this healthy sense* will blow like a refreshing breeze through gompas, viharas, zendos, meditation centres, and international Buddhist conference halls everywhere, scattering to the four winds of heaven whatever pseudo-answers, dogmatic assertions, and exaggerated claims prevail in those places. There is much that we do not know, whether regarding the world, regarding Buddhism, or regarding ourselves. In every field of knowledge, what we know is infinitesimal compared with what we do not know. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of Buddhism. In speaking about the Dharma we ought, therefore, always to distinguish between what we know from direct personal experience (e.g. that respiration-mindfulness can lead to the attainment of the *dhyānas*), what seems reasonable to us according to the evidence at our disposal, (e.g. that people are reborn after death), and what we accept on the testimony of the scriptures (e.g. that the Buddha was Enlightened). These categories are illustrative rather than definitive, and we must in any case always bear in mind that with regard to the second and third of them, at least, considerations of a more general philosophical nature cannot be excluded.

The breeze of a healthy agnosticism has of course blown, from time to time, through the corridors of Western thought. According to Batchelor, the methodological principle that T.H. Huxley expressed positively as 'Follow your reason as far as it will take you' and negatively as 'Do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable' runs through the Western tradition, from Socrates, via the Reformation and the (18th century) Enlightenment, to the axioms of modern science. This is what Huxley, who coined the term 'agnosticism' in 1869, called the 'agnostic faith', and Batchelor believes that the Buddha shared this faith, for he, too, 'followed his reason as far as it would take him and did not pretend that any conclusion was certain unless it was demonstrable' (p.17). There are several points to be made here. In view of the fact that for a thousand years the Western tradition was a Christian tradition one cannot really say of Huxley's ag-[23]nostic principle that it 'runs through' that tradition. It is also doubtful if Socrates was an agnostic, for while he regularly exposed the pretensions of those who, though they claimed to know, in fact merely believed, he also asserted the immortality of the soul, accepted the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle regarding himself, and maintained that there was a *daimon* who at times directed him to refrain from a certain course of action. It is even more doubtful to what extent the agnostic principle runs through the Protestant Reformation, for did not Martin Luther, its great inaugurator, not only preach salvation by faith rather than works but go so far as to call reason a whore? There is no doubt that the principle runs through the (18th century) Enlightenment. At the time of the French Revolution the breeze in fact became a hurricane that blew down, at least for the time being, all manner of ancient idols. Unfortunately it also set up an idol of its own in their place, an idol called Reason, which in the form of a young woman from the Opera was taken in procession to the cathedral of Notre-Dame, set on the high altar, and worshipped with the singing of hymns.¹⁰ Batchelor does not set up any idols, not even an idol called

Agnosticism, but he certainly believes that ‘Buddhists’ (to borrow his own inverted commas) do something very much like this in relation to Buddhism, and to this aspect of his thinking I must now turn. But first there is a final point to be made in connection with his claims on behalf of Huxley’s ‘agnostic faith’. The Buddha definitely believed that you should ‘follow your reason as far as it will take you’, but this does not mean that there is not in man a higher faculty capable of taking him beyond reason. The Dharma is explicitly stated to be *atakkavācāra*, ‘beyond reason’ or ‘inaccessible to logic’.¹¹ This was why the Buddha initially hesitated to communicate his discovery of it to the world.¹²

According to Batchelor, Buddhists make the mistake of turning ‘four ennobling truths to be acted upon’ into ‘four propositions of fact to be believed’ (p.5). They do this because ‘the crucial distinction that *each truth requires being acted upon in its own particular way* (understanding anguish, *letting go of* its origins, *realising* its cessation, and *cultivating* the path) has been relegated to the margins of specialist doctrinal knowledge’ (p.4). I have already questioned Batchelor’s assertion that ‘few Buddhists today are probably aware of the distinction’ between these four kinds of action (p.2), and it is still [24] more questionable whether the four truths were, in fact, turned into four propositions on account of a failure to make this admittedly important distinction. Batchelor does not tell us exactly when the ‘mistake’ was originally committed, or just who committed it, but he appears to believe that it was committed shortly after the Buddha’s death, perhaps even before it, and that it was subsequently committed by all Buddhists except for a handful of iconoclastic Indian tantric sages and others who were, presumably, the forerunners of his belief-free, agnostic Buddhism. He does however tell us into just what propositions the truths were – and are – turned. ‘The first truth becomes: “Life is Suffering”; the second: “The cause of Suffering is Craving”’ – and so on. (p.5). But if we turn to the *locus classicus* of the Buddha’s teaching of the four truths, the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* or Discourse setting in motion the Wheel of the Doctrine, what do we find? We find the Buddha telling the five ascetics:

‘Now this, monks, is the noble truth of pain [or suffering, *dukkha*]: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful. In short the five groups of grasping are painful.

‘Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cause of pain: the craving, which tends to rebirth, combined with pleasure and lust, finding pleasure here and there, namely the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence’ –

And so on.¹³ Here we obviously have a number of *propositions*. In particular we have the proposition ‘The five groups of grasping (*pañcupādāna-kkhandhā*) are suffering’ and the proposition ‘The cause of pain is craving’. Having affirmed these and the other two propositions (i.e. those relating to the cessation of suffering and the way thereto), the Buddha goes on to declare that he has, respectively, understood, let go of, cultivated, and realised them. Here there is no question of four ennobling truths to be acted upon being ‘neatly turned’, in Batchelor’s phrase (p.5), into four truths to be believed (or if there is, it is the Buddha himself who is responsible for the transformation), much less still is there any question of the turning being due to a failure to make the [25] crucial distinction that ‘*each truth requires being acted upon in its own particular way*’ (p.4). Believing in a proposition of fact is *not* incompatible with acting upon it. Indeed, action presupposes belief, whether explicit or implicit. It was only because the five ascetics had come to *believe* that their erstwhile companion had in fact attained Enlightenment (they did not *know* this) that they were able to *believe* the four noble truths and act upon them. This is not to say that belief

may not sometimes be blind; Batchelor equips with initial capital letters the words making up the propositions into which, he alleges, the first two truths were ‘turned’. This would appear to signal his conviction – I had almost said his belief – that belief is blind almost by definition. For him therefore, action, i.e. acting upon the four truths, and belief, i.e. believing in the four truths as propositions of fact, are not only distinct but separate, not only separate but mutually exclusive. Nor is this all. Action and belief being mutually exclusive, for Batchelor it follows that Dharma practice consists in acting upon the four truths to the exclusion of all beliefs, and although he *might* argue that he believed in the four truths, but not as propositions, the fact of the matter is that a belief is necessarily expressed in propositional form. It is his advocacy of this belief-free dharma practice that characterises the agnostic Buddhist and distinguishes him from those Buddhists who, by turning the four truths into propositions to be believed and thus the Buddha’s teaching into a ‘religion’ (for Batchelor a pejorative term), make it possible for ‘Buddhist [to be] distinguished from Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, who believe different sets of propositions’ and for ‘the four ennobling truths [to] become principal dogmas of the belief system known as “Buddhism”’ (p.5).

We have seen that for the Buddha, in the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* (and elsewhere), belief in a proposition of fact is not incompatible with acting upon such a proposition. It remains for us to see what consequences flow from this position, as well as what consequences flow from the contrary position adopted by Batchelor, namely, that in the case of the four truths, at least, action and belief are incompatible, even mutually exclusive.

Belief in the four truths as propositions of fact is not incompatible with action upon them because neither the belief nor the acting is ever absolute. There are *degrees* of such belief and *degrees* of such acting, the latter being usually commensurate with the former. We have no hesitation in setting out [26] on a journey to Rome, for example, because we really do believe that there such a place exists and that if we take the right road we will sooner or later arrive there. On the other hand, there are occasions when we are not sure – perhaps cannot be sure – either that the goal on which we have set our heart exists or that, assuming it really does exist, that we have adopted the right means for its achievement. Nonetheless, believing that it exists and that the means we have adopted are the right ones, we go on employing those means until such time as experience confirms both our belief in the existence of the one and our belief in the rightness of the other – or does *not* confirm them. Belief of this kind is relative, not absolute; qualified, not unqualified; provisional, not final; and tentative, not certain. It is on account of this *provisional* belief – as for the sake of convenience it may be termed – that we accept the four truths as propositions of fact and act upon them in the particular way each requires and according to the degree of our belief. Actual *knowledge* of the four truths comes only with the attainment of the Transcendental Path. Not that provisional belief is ever mere belief. It is belief that enjoys the support of evidence and arguments which, though they may not be conclusive, are yet sufficiently strong for us to be willing to take the risk of acting upon the belief. Provisional belief is therefore also rational belief. In the case of the five ascetics, they were initially unimpressed by the Buddha’s claim to be Enlightened and refused to listen to his teaching. Only when he had convinced them with an argument (‘Have you ever known me to speak like this before?’)¹⁴ did his declaration (‘The Tathāgata is an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One’)¹⁵ become for them a proposition of fact to be (provisionally) believed. Similarly, it was only on account of their provisional, rational belief in the four truths he subsequently taught them that they were able to act upon those truths and, by so doing, come to know them for themselves and attain Nirvana.¹⁶ Here there is a progression from ignorance and scepticism to actual knowledge (or transcendental knowledge, as *pace* Batchelor I prefer to call it), via the successive stages of a provisional belief which, as it is confirmed by

experience, becomes less and less provisional and provides an increasingly firm basis for further action. The path is thus a graduated path in which, as the Buddha said when comparing the Dharma and Vinaya to the Great Ocean, ‘there are progressive trainings, progressive obligations, progressive practices, there being no sudden penetrations of supreme Knowledge.’¹⁷

Since the path is a graduated path instruction must be methodical, beginning at the beginning, and not introducing more advanced teachings until the disciple has mastered the more elementary ones. We find the Buddha adopting this approach on a number of occasions. He adopted it with Anāthapiṇḍika, the wealthy merchant who was to be one of his principal supporters:

‘Then did the Exalted One discourse unto Anāthapiṇḍika, the housefather, with talk that led gradually on, thus: of charity and righteousness and the heaven-world; of the danger, uselessness, and defilement of the passions, and of the profit of giving up the world. And when the Exalted One saw that the heart of Anāthapiṇḍika, the housefather, was made pliable and soft without obstruction, uplifted and calmed, then did he set forth the Dharma teaching of the Buddhas, proclaimed the most excellent, that is, suffering, the arising of suffering, the ceasing of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’¹⁸

A discourse of this kind is known (in Pali) as an *anupubbikathā* or ‘graduated discourse’, dealing as it does with the ever higher values of charity (*dāna*), righteousness (*sīla*), the heaven-world (*sagga*), and the path (*magga*). It was to provide, in the centuries that followed, the pattern for discourses and systematic expositions of the Dharma throughout the Buddhist world, in the case of the Mahāyāna being associated with the concept of *upāya-kauśalya* or ‘skilful means’. In 12th century Tibet, for example, we find ‘Teacher’ Drom, Atisha’s chief disciple, leading a pious, but perhaps simple-minded, layman to a deeper understanding of the meaning of Dharma practice in the following manner:

‘One day an old gentleman was circumambulating the Ra-dreng monastery. Geshe Drom said to him, “Sir, I am happy to see you circumambulating, but wouldn’t you rather be practicing the Dharma?”’

Thinking this over, the old gentleman felt it might be better to read Mahāyāna sūtras. While he was reading in the temple courtyard, Geshe [28] Drom said, “I am happy to see you reciting sūtras, but wouldn’t you rather be practicing Dharma?”

At this, the old gentleman thought that perhaps he should meditate. He sat cross-legged on a cushion, with his eyes half-closed. The teacher Drom said again, “I am so happy to see you meditating, but wouldn’t it be better to practice the Dharma?”

Now totally confused, the old gentleman asked, “Geshe-la, please tell me what I should do to practice the Dharma?”

The teacher Drom replied, “Renounce attraction to this life. Renounce it now. For if you do not renounce attraction to this life, whatever you do will not be the practice of Dharma, as you have not passed beyond the eight worldly concerns. Once you have renounced this life’s habitual thoughts and are no longer distracted by the eight worldly concerns, whatever you do will advance you on the path of liberation.”¹⁹

Strange to say, this anecdote from the *Kadamthorbu* or ‘Precepts Collected from Here and There’ features as the epigraph to the second part of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, on the Path, though Batchelor appears to have mistaken its meaning. He appears to believe that practices such as circumambulating monasteries, reading *sūtras*, and even meditation as practised by the old

gentleman, are a complete waste of time. They are a waste of time because they form part of *religion*, along with exotic names, robes, and insignia of office. Buddhism became a 'religion' when the four ennobling truths to be acted upon were turned into four propositions of fact to be *believed*. Authentic dharma practice therefore has nothing to do with practices and observances of a 'religious' nature. For Batchelor, as we have already seen, acting upon the four truths and believing them as propositions of fact are incompatible, even mutually exclusive. Curiously enough, in his 'reworking' of Geshe Wangyal's translation of the anecdote from the *Kadamthorbu* he substitutes for Drom's final reply, which is sufficiently plain, straightforward, and practical, a version 'heard from Tibetan lamas' (p.122). 'When you practise', Drom is made to say, 'there is no distinction between the Dharma and your own mind' (p.55) – [29] a gnomic utterance that could well have left the old gentleman feeling more confused than ever.

Batchelor illustrates his thesis that the four truths are simply injunctions to act, and have nothing to do with belief or with religious practices and observances, by referring to a passage in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In this passage Alice enters a room to find a bottle marked with the label 'Drink Me'. As Batchelor points out, the label does not tell Alice what is inside the bottle but tells her what to do with it. Similarly, 'when the Buddha presented his four truths, he first described what each referred to, then enjoined his listeners to act upon them' (p.7). For reasons I have never quite understood, Lewis Carroll's classic children's story has always been popular with a certain type of British Buddhist (the late Christmas Humphreys was fond of describing the work as 'pure Zen'), and it is interesting to find Batchelor citing it in this connection. Apparently all we have to do is act upon the four truths without asking any questions, just as Alice drank the contents of the little bottle simply because the label told her to do so. Not that the 'wise little Alice' of the story was going to do such a thing in a hurry. Though Batchelor does not mention the fact, she decides to look first and see whether the bottle is marked 'poison' or not; 'for she had read several nice little histories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and many other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked "poison", it is almost certain to disagree with you sooner or later.'

Apparently Batchelor has not read any such nice little histories, for he evidently thinks we should be less wise than Alice and drink the contents of the bottle without first seeing whether they will disagree with us or not. In Alice's case there was only one bottle, it was not marked 'poison', and drinking its contents only made her grow smaller. Today anyone who follows the White Rabbit down the rabbit-hole into the Wonderland of the spiritual supermarket will find themselves confronted not by one bottle but hundreds, of all shapes, sizes, and colours, and all marked 'Drink Me' – some of them in very large letters indeed. Among the bottles there is one, usually also marked [30] 'Buddhism', that contains the four truths. Why should we drink the contents of this bottle rather than the contents of one – or more – of the various other bottles? All bear the same injunction: 'Drink Me'. Admittedly, the label on the yellow 'Buddhist' bottle tells us what ingredients its particular contents contain. As Batchelor says, when the Buddha presented his four truths, he first described what each referred to. But the labels on all the other bottles also describe what their respective bottles contain, some of them at great length and in very forcible terms. Some, indeed, describe not only the advantages to be gained from drinking the contents of their particular bottle but the terrible things that will happen to one if one does *not* drink them. One might argue (if argument was permitted) that the contents of the Buddhist bottle are described by the Buddha; it is the Buddha who enjoins us to act upon the four truths, and since he is the Buddha, having himself

understood anguish, let go of its origins, realised its cessation, and cultivated the path, we have no alternative but to comply. But how do we know that the Buddha is what he is said to be, i.e. Enlightened? Like the five ascetics, we need to be convinced of the fact, and it is only evidence and argument that will convince us. Once convinced, we are in a position to develop the degree of rational faith sufficient to enable us to start acting as he enjoins. We may also need to be convinced that 'anguish' is, in fact, caused by craving, that craving really can be made to cease and that there is a path leading to its cessation. There are people who doubt all these things, and who are no more prepared to comply with an injunction to act upon the four truths than they are prepared to observe the Ten Commandments. Batchelor's assertion that action and belief are incompatible not only rules out 'the dogmas of the belief system called "Buddhism"' (p.5) but precludes both the possibility of developing a rational belief and the following of a graduated path. Authentic Buddhist practice consists in acting upon the four truths, to the total exclusion of practices and observances of a religious nature ('religion' is equivalent to belief), and we act upon them simply because we are so enjoined. Strictly speaking, indeed, there is no question of any 'because'. We are told to act upon them, and we act, just as Alice was told 'Drink Me' and she drank – except that in our case we are not, it seems, allowed to harbour any doubts. Buddhist agnosticism [31] thus turns out to be a form of authoritarianism. The Buddha speaks – or Batchelor speaks in his name – and we have no option but to obey.

(iv)

THAT 'LE STYLE EST L'HOMME MÊME' and that 'the medium is the message' may well be clichés, but there is still a good deal of truth in them. An author's choice of words, as well the way in which he actually uses those words, can often reveal something of his conscious and unconscious intentions. In the preface to *Buddhism Without Beliefs* Batchelor tells us that he has tried to write a book on Buddhism in ordinary English that avoids the use of foreign words, technical terms, lists, and jargon. This is obviously a laudable aim. But he also tells us, 'The one exception is the word "Dharma," for which I can find no English equivalent' (p.xi), which is really rather ingenuous, suggesting as it does that he has found English equivalents for all the other Buddhist terms. The reader is thus lulled into a false sense of security and into an uncritical acceptance, therefore, of words such as awakening, freedom, awareness, and meditation as being the actual equivalents of traditional Buddhist terms and as providing us with a vocabulary adequate to the discussion of important aspects of the Dharma. It is also noteworthy that although he professes to write in ordinary English there is a whole class of words that Batchelor repeatedly employs not in accordance with standard usage but only pejoratively. Such are the words religion, belief, spiritual, mystical, transcendental, holiness, hierarchy, ritual, and institution. Even 'Buddhism', within inverted commas, is employed in this way. All these words, in their pejorative sense, Batchelor associates with what he terms 'religious Buddhism' (also pejorative). Words such as freedom, democratic, secular, and pluralist, together with the fashionable 'vulnerability' and 'empowerment', he on the contrary associates with belief-free, agnostic Buddhism. Moreover, Batchelor is not above occasionally playing to the populist gallery, as when, speaking of the challenging of certain views, he declares, in ringing tones as it were, 'The doors of awakening were thrown open to those barred from it by the strictures and dogmas of a privileged elite. Laity, women, the uneducated – the disempowered – were invited to taste the freedom of the dharma for themselves' (p.13). [32]

Batchelor indeed is stronger in rhetoric than in argument, in assertion than in demonstration. There is in fact very little in the way of actual argument in his book, which is probably why it is

such a slender production. Reading it, I was reminded of the occasion when, nearly thirty years ago, I heard a solemn-voiced Norman O. Brown slowly and deliberately reading extracts from his forthcoming book *Love's Body* to an audience of some three hundred American undergraduates. The reading was received in complete silence. There were no questions afterwards. No questions were expected. The oracle had spoken. *Buddhism Without Beliefs* will certainly not be received in silence. Questions will certainly be asked (they are being asked already), despite the fact that much of the book is written in an oracular, categorical style that gives one the impression that Batchelor is speaking *ex cathedra*. This impression is heightened by his noticeable fondness for the imperative mood, sentences in which mood are scattered throughout the book. None of this is surprising. Reliance on rhetoric rather than argument, an oracular, categorical style, an *ex cathedra* delivery, and a fondness for the imperative, are all characteristics of the language of authoritarianism.

This is not to say that Batchelor himself necessarily has an authoritarian personality. The authoritarianism is inherent in his intellectual position, according to which acting upon the four truths and belief in them are incompatible, so that authentic Dharma practice consists in our acting upon those truths simply because we have been enjoined to do so, anything of the nature of ('religious') belief, even rational belief, being entirely excluded. Nor is it to say that Batchelor's reliance on rhetoric is a matter of personal choice. This too is inherent in his intellectual position, for if one is convinced that Dharmic practice consists simply in compliance with, or obedience to, an injunction, not much room will be left for argument. Batchelor is in fact not unaware of the danger of 'falling a prey to the bewitchment of language' (p.40), and if he does fall prey to that bewitchment himself to an extent, it is due as much to the logic of his position as to inadvertence. Similarly, if there is a trace of messianism in his attitude, this is not because he is unaware of 'the danger of messianic and narcissistic inflation' (p.90), much less still because he has any messianic pretensions, but rather because he is genuinely convinced that he, [33] perhaps alone in his generation, has discovered what the Buddha *really* taught and how it can be made relevant to Western culture.

Disagreement with a respected fellow Buddhist is painful, as I observed earlier, even as agreement is pleasant. Though there is much in Batchelor's book that I find unacceptable and which I deplore, fortunately there is also much that is acceptable to me and in which I can rejoice. Similarly, though I am obliged to reject his basic thesis as illogical and as a serious misrepresentation of the Dharma I can, at the same time, not only appreciate his sincerity of purpose but sympathise with his position. It is not easy to be a Western Buddhist. Inheritors as we are of an enormously rich and complex spiritual tradition that does not always speak with a single voice and comes to us embedded in a variety of colourful alien cultures, it is not easy for us to separate the essential from the non-essential, to decide what is relevant to our spiritual needs and what is not, or to determine the exact nature of the relationship between Buddhism on the one hand and Western culture on the other. If some of us, in our struggle to make sense of Buddhism for ourselves and others, should happen to overestimate the importance of this or that aspect of the Dharma, or allow ourselves to be carried to extremes of affirmation and denial, as Batchelor does with his advocacy of a belief-free, agnostic Buddhism, this is understandable and forgivable. Extremism will always find a following, and *Buddhism Without Beliefs* will no doubt find many appreciative readers. This need not dismay us. People come into contact with the Dharma in a variety of ways. Many, I know, have come in contact with it through reading Lobsang Rampa's *The Third Eye* or Christmas Humphreys' *Buddhism*, or as a result of seeing a Bruce Lee film, and I am confident that at least some of those in whom an interest in Buddhism is awakened by *Buddhism*

Without Beliefs will sooner or later find their way to more adequate sources of information. The end of the golden string now being in their hand, they have only to wind it into a ball.

(v)

WHAT, THEN, HAVE I LEARNED from writing this review? I must confess I have not learned anything I did not know before, though the exercise has certainly helped clarify some of my perceptions and this is always useful. It is [34] clearer to me than ever that the Dharma is an ocean, and that its depths are not to be plumbed by reason alone, that the human mind is capable of mingling truth and falsehood to such an extent that in some cases ‘A Hair perhaps divides the False and True’ and it is difficult to separate them, that ideologically speaking Buddhism's near enemies can be more dangerous than its distant ones, that language must be looked at no less clearly than its content, and that for one seeking to understand and explain the Dharma sincerity is not enough. Finally, it is clearer to me that while the writing of reviews may be a minor form of literary activity, so long as new books on Buddhism continue to be published it is possible for it to perform a useful, even a necessary, function.

Sangharakshita is the founder of the Western Buddhist Order.

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Notes

¹ Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, Athlone Press, London & Atlantic Highlands 1996, pp. 48–49.

² Quotations from Batchelor's book, and references (without quotation marks) to specific points he makes, adhere to Batchelor's own typographical conventions.

³ Thrangu Rinpoche, *King of Samādhi*, Rangjun Yeshe Publications, Hong Kong, Boudanath & Arhus, 1994, p.89. According to the same author, *ibid.* p.47, children die of starvation in Africa due to their lack of merit.

⁴ *Samyutta-Nikāya* XXXVI, II, 3, 21. Tr. F.L. Woodward, *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, Part IV, Luzac, London 1956, p.155.

⁵ *Samyutta-Nikāya* XLV, I, I, ii. Tr. F.L. Woodward, *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, Luzac, London 1930, p.2. Woodward translates *kalyāṇa-mitrata* as ‘friendship with what is lovely.’

⁶ *Udāna* VIII, 3. Tr. Gombrich, *op. cit.* p.42.

⁷ Peter Morris, *Power: a philosophical analysis*, Manchester University Press 1987, p.4.

⁸ *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* IX, IV, 41. Tr. E.M. Hare, *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Pali Text Society, London, 1978, p.295.

⁹ Gombrich, *op. cit.* pp.96 et seq.

¹⁰ For a colourful description of the ceremony see Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, Chapman and Hall, London 1871, Vol.III, pp. 193–194.

¹¹ *Majjhima-Nikāya*, Sutta 72. Tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston 1995, p.593.

¹² Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy 1978, p.37.

¹³ *Samyutta-Nikāya* LVI, XII, II, i. Tr. Edward J. Thomas, *Early Buddhist Scriptures*, Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner, London 1935, p.30.

¹⁴ *Majjhima-Nikāya*, Sutta 26. Tr. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *op. cit.* p.265.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.264.

¹⁶ The *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, Sutta 26) does not actually mention the Four Truths. The *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* (*Saṃyutta-Nikāya* LVI, XXII, II, i) speaks of them as having been taught to the five ascetics.

¹⁷ *Udāna* V, 5. Tr. Peter Masefield, *The Udāna*, Pali Text Society, Oxford 1994, p.97.

¹⁸ *Vinaya-Piṭaka* ii, 6, 4. Tr. F.L. Woodward, *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, The Buddhist Society, London 1973, p.96 changing Woodward's 'Norm' to 'Dharma'.

¹⁹ Geshe Wangyal, *The Door of Liberation*, Maurice Girodias, New York 1973, pp.141–142.