

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 2 of 8

Part 3 (13:53) Stephen Batchelor and Joan Halifax: The first great vow

Part 4 (61:22) Stephen Batchelor and Joan Halifax: Input from participants

Part 3

1. How does the story Roshi recounts at the beginning of the discussion illustrate embracing all of life?
2. Cite the multiple definitions/synonyms of the Sansrit *upekha* that Batchelor offers and then, from a web search, provide another differing definition or synonym. What advice do Batchelor and Halifax offer for recognising whether one is equanimous or is captured by one of its near enemies – resignation, withdrawal or indifference?

Part 4

3. Batchelor's premise is that 'empathy is a natural, naturalistic consequence of being a social being' which accounts for our immediate empathy for those close to us and less empathy or indifference to those far from us (by view, by race and so on). He proposes that to extend that circle of empathy outside of the circle of those with whom we are close, is to 'be fully human'. Why would this be a definitive view in the face of another opposing view: while we are naturally endowed with empathy, we are also predatory beings, driven to survive, often at a cost to others?

4. What is the distinction Roshi makes between empathy (affective resonance or emotional attunement, i.e., feeling with) and compassion (concern for the wellbeing of another and the wish to benefit that other, i.e., feeling for)? Why is it important to make the distinction?
5. Rephrase Roshi's comment on moving into compassion: one is able offer 'more presence', up-regulating one's empathic resonance by going into 'a meta-cognitive perspective'.
6. What are some of the detrimental results of misunderstanding empathy as being synonymous with compassion? What are the benefits to oneself of engaging skilfully and compassionately with another or others?
7. Pointing out that many moral dilemmas operate on the ethics cusp of competing goods, Batchelor comments that the situational ethics of the dharma entails risk; that the 'greatest teacher of ethics is living ethically'. Do you agree or disagree that the dharma offers us guidance as opposed to rules for determining what is beneficial and what is harmful (i.e., the five precepts; the ten precepts; the three pure precepts; the four Brahmaviharas; right speech, right action, right livelihood of the eightfold path)? If the ethical precepts are guidance, the skilful response depending on the situation, on what basis can you know whether your response was skilful or not? If ethical precepts are rules, are authoritative, not dependent on the situation, how does one resolve one's mind when the precepts one has committed to are violated?
8. Of the three fetters that fall away at stream-entry: 1 self-identity (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), 2 doubt (*vicikicchā*), 3 attachment to rites and rituals (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*). The latter has been translated by the contemporary monastic and translator, Bhikkhu Bodhi, as 'attachment to virtues and vows'. What distinguishes 'rites and rituals' from 'virtues and vows'?
9. Roshi points out that ceremony (which shares the same root as the word for 'cure') serves to enhance 'alignment in conditions where misalignment is present'. Ceremony

and ritual are visible actions which point to what is invisible in order to align not only our psyche but our relationships to each other. Give an example of a ritual or ceremony in dharma practice that you find beneficial. Why do you think that it so for you? If you find ritual or ceremony in dharma practice unsatisfying or tedious or... Why do you think that is so for you? Give an example to illustrate your point.

10. Compare the objectives of the first great vow with that of the first task, noting any correspondences and or their lack:

- Creations are numberless, I vow to free them
- Suffering is to be fully known

11. Following on the discussion of agnosticism, non-theism, atheism and secular Buddhism, Batchelor notes that faith (Sanskrit *sraddha*) or confidence, is crucial for effecting transformation or change, to 'transcend being locked into the inertia of habits, attachments and fears...' Responding to Batchelor, Roshi recounted that what moved her when she met the dharma were not such lofty aspirations but her own suffering and the need to address it. What moved you when you met the dharma? Have your motivations changed since you first began the practice? How so?

12. The discussion closes with definitions of faith. The first by Paul Tillich is of faith as 'the state of being ultimately concerned'. The second and third definitions of faith are from the Tibetan tradition: 1) being a state of yearning, a longing to go beyond, to be free of confusions, limitations, neurosis; and 2) a state of clarity or lucidity, a state in which one sees things clearly. What thread runs through the three definitions?