

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 5 of 8

Part 8 (60:45) Stephen Batchelor: The third task: stopping reactivity

1. What is the distinction Batchelor makes between stopping reactivity and seeing the stopping of reactivity? What is the point he is trying to convey in making this distinction?
2. While in the early Buddhist texts, *nirvana* is defined as the ending of greed, the ending of hatred and the ending of delusion, in some later dharma traditions, *nirvana* is understood as the state in which greed hatred and delusion have been extinguished. Batchelor advises that by ‘focusing on specific instances in your own life, there I think, we can begin to translate these generalities, these values, into specific moments that you and I actually experience.’ Give an example from your own experience of cessation of reactivity, first framing it up as illustrative of the truth of cessation and, second, framing it up as a specific moment of experience.
3. Given that stopping reactivity is not something that we must do but instead entails simply not identifying with the reaction that the ‘reaction left to its own devices ... will come to an end.’ This begs the question ‘isn’t such not identifying, i.e., seeing what’s going on an action? Isn’t this the skill (activity) of cultivating insight? Why so or why not so?’
4. To ‘dwell in that stopping, to actually consciously affirm and notice it’s stopped’ and at once affirming the absence, there is then a release, peace, clarity, opening. How is it that this stopping ‘affords the possibility of doing something different’?

5. What is the point Batchelor makes in quoting sixth patriarch of the Chan tradition, Hui Neng, as follows: *even in the midst of thought, there is no thought*?
6. Similarly, what is the point Batchelor makes in quoting from two early suttas as follows: 'The dharma is clearly visible and immediate and *nirvana* is clearly visible and immediate'?
7. Unpack the phrase, 'this is a Buddhology of immanence and not transcendence'.
8. What is the critique of the claim that emptiness must be understood in order to attain enlightenment?
9. *Mahapurusa vihara*, translated by Batchelor as the 'dwelling of the great person', privileges being-in-the-world over knowledge of the world. How do you read this 'being-in-the-world in the sutta On Emptiness (*Cūlasuññata Sutta*)?
10. Consider in this sutta the sequence of *viharas* or dwellings: from awareness of creatures and crowds; to awareness of wilderness; to awareness of the earth's expanse; to awareness of unbounded space; to awareness of unbounded consciousness; to awareness of nothing; to neither awareness nor unawareness; to an unthemed meditation of the heart; to the realisation that 'an unthemed meditation of the heart is conditioned and contrived, and whatever is conditioned and contrived is impermanent and subject to cessation'; to the realisation of freedom. How would you characterise the progression through these dwellings or *viharas*?
11. If you're familiar with *jhana* practice and have an opinion on Batchelor's statement that 'once you come out of these states, you're basically no better off than you were before', on what basis do you disagree or agree with his view?
12. Just as the *jhana* states are conditioned, manufactured, impermanent and contrived, the four foundations of mindfulness, the multiple *vipassana* contemplations; the four *brahmaviharas*, the practices of *koan* and *shikantaza*, the variety of visualisation practices (such as *tonglen* and deity yoga), the meditations of *mahamudra* and *maha*

ati, are conditioned, manufactured, impermanent and contrived. Would it be fair to say of the latter group, that they, like *jhana* practice, are what are to be abandoned, and are abandoned, when one has insight into the nature of things? Here Batchelor is defining this insight as a state in which one 'is no longer bound by trying to manipulate [one's] inner experience in such a way that it brings you into a particular state of consciousness but simply to be with what's happening but not to be caught up in your reactive desires or dislikes or opinions'.

13. In the sutta the fruition of realisation is described: *this state of awareness is empty of those influences* [the influences of cupidity, becoming and nescience]. *That which is not empty is this: the six sense fields of a living body.* If this description runs counter to what you've learned prior as the freedom of *nirvana*, how so?
14. How is it that emptiness is something into which we descend?
15. What is the crux of Batchelor's criticism on translations in which the terms *nirvana*, unconditioned, deathless have an initial capital letter and preceded by the word 'the'?
16. What is the reasoning offered for the claim that the first and third tasks are identical? Similarly, what is the reasoning offered for the claim that the four tasks are not effected apart from one another but were taught as four as a skilful means?
17. What did you take, if anything, from Batchelor's recount of the Buddha having identified and praised lay people who had achieved awakening, had seen the deathless, who abided unconditioned by greed, hatred and delusion?