

# 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 1 of 8

Part 1 (29:59) Stephen Batchelor & Joan Halifax: Introductory session

Part 2 (65:44) Stephen Batchelor: The first task: Embracing *dukkha* or the whole of life

## Part 1

1. Of the responses to the question ‘What does it mean to be fully human’, are there one or two responses with which you resonated? How so?
2. If you answered the question differently than those participating in the course, what was your response?
3. Define the Sanskrit word *upaya*. Define the term ‘unified field theory’.  
What do you understand from Roshi’s comment that, in the work being done at Upaya Zen Center, the objectives do not include creating a unified field theory?
4. Batchelor’s response to the question of what it is to be fully human is to be a ‘practicing being’. What is it to be a ‘practicing being’? What would be the alternative?
5. The correspondence between the four tasks and the four vows will frame the lectures and discussions. What correspondences do you see between:

- I. • Suffering is to be fully known – **Embrace**
  - Creations are numberless, I vow to free them
  
- II. • Arising is to be let go of – **Let go**
  - Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them
  
- III. • Ceasing is to be experienced – **Stop**
  - Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it
  
- IV. • Path is to be cultivated – **Act**
  - The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it

## Part 2

1. Batchelor understands the dharma to be a ‘task-based ethics rather than a truth-based metaphysics’. What are the causes for the dharma over time having been taught as a collection of metaphysical views? What are the implications of understanding the four noble *truths* as four *tasks* to be accomplished?
  
2. In asking the rhetorical ‘What does it mean to embrace life?’, Batchelor breaks down *dukkha pariñña* as follows: *dukkha* = suffering; *pari* = around; *ñña* = to know or to comprehend. *Dukkha pariñña* thus means to fully know suffering; that this is the ‘dimension [of life] that we seek to embrace’. What is his point here in contrasting this embrace’, i.e., this practice of fully knowing *dukkha*, with the view that life is marked by suffering in which the aim of practice to bring suffering to an end? If your view differs from Batchelor’s on this characterisation of unnamed schools, what is your view?
  
3. Consider that the Buddha taught that *dukkha* is inclusive of the totality of our experience. *Dukkha* refers to: our physical embodiment; everything that we see, hear, smell, taste and touch; our consciousness; our perception; our awareness of what’s going on; how we feel about what’s happening; how we incline ourselves to respond or react. Batchelor’s advice here is, as opposed to accepting as a truth claim that life is

*dukkha*, instead the task is to contemplate the question ‘in what way is our present experience characterised by *dukkha*?’ In what way is your present experience typically marked by *dukkha*? In what way is your present experience typically marked by *sukha*, i.e. pleasure, contentment?

4. Batchelor points to poignancy as a term that captures the felt sense of *dukkha*. Provide a definition of ‘poignancy’.
5. As illustrative of such poignancy in the embrace: in the moments of contentment or peace, there is an intuition or an awareness that the moment will not last (*dukkha*) but that this awareness does not diminish the joy or appreciation (*sukha*) of the moment. What does Batchelor point to as what is to be accomplished by embracing *dukkha*? What is the alternative?
6. Embracing the fact of the impermanence of our own and other’s lives, comprehending that life depends on innumerable impermanent causes and conditions, leads to an inescapable awareness that ‘life in all its aspects contains a tragic dimension but tragedy too, is not depressing or miserable. Tragedy is what gives life a sense of depth.’ Batchelor claims that this sense of depth, when deepened, leads to a sense of wonderment, a sense of mystery, a sense of the sublime. While not explicit in this talk, what would you infer is absent from this appreciation of the sublime?
7. What it is that is recognised in moments in the midst of tragedy that turns one’s mind to wonder, mystery or sublimity and not instead, to depression, misery, or defeat?
8. Batchelor characterises poignancy as exceeding the mind’s capacity for representation; that which stops mind’s chatter; that which is the heart of meditation. How do you think that formal meditation or contemplation in post-meditation opens one’s being to this recognition of poignancy?
9. On the translation of *dukkha* as ‘life’ – is this rendering helpful to you in expanding the meaning when contrasted with the usual renderings of *dukkha* as ‘suffering’, ‘dissatisfaction’, ‘pain’, ‘anxiety’, ‘stress’? If so, how so. If not, what is lacking?

10. The Buddha defined fully knowing *dukkha*, or comprehending *dukkha* (*dukkha pariñña*) as the ending of greed, the ending of hatred, the ending of delusion. What is exceptional about this knowing (*dukkha pariñña*) vis-à-vis the conventional meaning of knowing?
11. In the early texts, the ‘privative not’ (or non-affirming negation) does not uniformly mean a simple absence. It often means the opposite of, as in the example of the three roots of virtue as ‘not greed, not hatred, not delusion’. This definition implies equanimity, love and clarity, respectively. How is the meaning of ‘embracing *dukkha*’ informed by this explanation on the use of the ‘privative not’ in the classical texts?
12. Batchelor states that through formal meditation and contemplation, to embrace life [*dukkha pariñña*] is to cultivate an open-hearted, radiant, equanimous stillness marked by attention, and clarity. What is absent from *dukkha pariñña*?
13. Batchelor states that *dukkha pariñña* has four dimensions. The first, the practice of *vipassana*, is a cognitive dimension, for example, the contemplation on the three marks of existence (impermanence; not-self; *dukkha*). What features of experience do the cognitive practices of *vipassana* reveal to us? How, through these contemplations infusing our consciousness, do the insight practices undermine habitual tendencies (Pali: *sankara*; Sanskrit: *samskara*)?
14. Restate Batchelor’s statement here on what it is to be ‘fully human’ referencing too, his earlier remark about that it is to be ‘a practicing being’.
15. *Dukkha pariñña* has a second dimension of cultivating a relentless questioning, a not-knowing that frees one from the drive to consolidate and justify one’s beliefs and opinions. Describe the moment-by-moment fruition of cultivating not-knowing?
16. *Dukkha pariñña* has a third dimension of an empathetic responsiveness to beings who are both near and far, both human and not human. Cite a few of the practices you’re

familiar with that give rise to this capacity for empathy. What fuels the power of such practices?

17. *Dukkha pariñña* has a fourth dimension of aesthetics, an enhancement of the sensibility that we cultivate in practice; it is an appreciation of the radiance, beauty, sublimity, or poignancy of life as expressed in art, literature, music, theatre. What can the aesthetic dimension reveal? Give an example from your own experience.