

# *To Study the Self*

Stephen Batchelor in conversation with Manu Bazzano.

Published in Hazy Moon the Zen Review Spring/Summer 2006

Strange but true: it's a sunny December afternoon in North London when I pick up the phone to call Stephen Batchelor, but, as it turns out, rainy and miserable in France where Stephen lives. He and Martine moved to Aquitaine in 2000, and they live in a small village near Bordeaux with their cat Alex.

The first surprise in reading Stephen's book *Living with the Devil*, reviewed by Tony Balazs in the previous issue of *Hazy Moon*, had been noticing the poetic beauty of some of its passages. I was also thrilled to notice Baudelaire being quoted for once, instead of the wonderful but ubiquitous, Americanised Rumi ...

## BUDDHISM AND MODERNITY

*Manu Bazzano: During your recent lecture at SOAS in London you defined transcendence as "going beyond my own limited ways"...*

Stephen Batchelor: Something like that... Transcendence for me is not to be mistaken for some sort of state, i.e. "the transcendent" in an abstract sense, but rather it refers to the capacity to transcend limits or what blocks the person in his/her path in life. When put in an explicitly spiritual or religious context (neither words I'm particularly fond of), then of course the transcendence is of what inhibits one *existentially*, in other words, what one could be or become...

*So we are not pointing out at metaphysical solutions or consolations...*

Definitely not.

*I mention that because, as you know, the meeting of Buddhism and Psychology is one of the ways in which East meets West, and within this trend Buddhism is often branded as “transpersonal psychology” with the term “transpersonal” carrying a whiff of the beyond-human, almost a ghostly realm perceived as separate. Your approach appears to be more humanistic. I don’t particularly like that definition, but it deals within the sphere of the human experience.*

Yes, I’d say that what I write about and am concern with is essentially what occurs within the human domain. I think human beings have an enormous, untapped potential and capacity to realize, but I don’t see that process in any sense entailing some transcendent being, entity, or consciousness, nor something *outside* the human domain. I would even go so far as to say that all such notions of metaphysical entities, no matter how compelling, beautiful and attractive, are nonetheless, in all probability, human inventions.

*Which takes me to another point. You often talk of contingency and modernity. There are two aspects, it seems to me, within our understanding of.. Freud talks of a great mourning for something lost, and before him of course there was Nietzsche and the death of God. Something has been irretrievably lost. According to this aspect, modernity is none other than the process of understanding, or attempting to understand, this tremendous loss.*

*The other aspect, I believe, affirms modernity as plurality, manifesting both within psyche and in the wide world. At one point in your book you write:*

*“Buddhism and the monotheistic religions can be understood as different ways of living with the devil.” My own reflection is that plurality, inherent in modernity, implies going back to, reclaiming, and accepting, the gods, i.e. polytheism.*

*Now, there seems to have been some degree of reductionism in both Christian theology and Dharma studies; in both cases we have gone back to a monistic view, where the battle is between God and the Devil, good and evil, morality and wickedness, Buddha and Mara. The middle ground, what the ancient Greeks called Metaxa, the realm of demons, angels etc, seems to have completely evaporated and all of these colourful characters have*

*been somewhat evicted from existence. But that middle ground is also the realm of plurality; there are different aspects in psyche. If we accept that plurality is one of the lessons of modernity, how does Buddhism, with its seemingly solid monistic roots, respond to it?*

By 'monistic', do you mean a difficulty for Buddhism to include a world which is not within its own parameters?

*Yes, and with it a dualism between opposites, delusion and liberation...*

I think Buddhism in its present phase is struggling to come to terms with modernity and by implication therefore plurality. The last two-three hundred years in the history of Buddhism have been a very introverted period, primarily in Asia, in which Buddhists have become rather too lost in their own internal debate, their own nationalist and sectarian cultures. Then suddenly, very rapidly in historical terms, Buddhists, whether Asian or Western converts, find themselves confronted with a complex world with all kinds of diversities and pluralities and no central religious authority. A world they are having a hard time making sense of; and this seems to go one or two ways. Either a Buddhist, rather like a fundamentalist, closes down and withdraws from this encounter and gives truth only to his own claims; everything else is seen as deluded or inadequate. Or, and this is the other way Buddhism goes, has a rather uncritical encounter with modernity in which very often it picks up signs within the modern world, like psychotherapy for example, for which it feels some affinity, without thinking very hard about the implications. It just runs with that association, moving dangerously close to subsuming itself into those elements of the modern world that it feels endorse its own legitimacy.

*There is a danger, then. Buddhism as a living organism certainly changes within a modern society, but some of its ideas can be ... distorted?*

Well, absorbed into other things. As you yourself said, Buddhism can become a branch of transpersonal psychotherapy. There is a great danger

that Buddhism sees itself too exclusively in terms of its *psychological* insights and practices. It's very tempting as a westerner to reduce it to that, but in doing so you lose, I think, the richness and the scope of Buddhism as a much wider, *cultural* phenomenon.

*Going back to pluralism... to me, pluralism means different aspects within psyche but also different gods. What I like in certain schools of Buddhism, in Zen for instance, is the ambivalent attitude towards deities. Sometimes a deity is an externalisation of my own qualities, of something within "me", and sometimes it is almost literal, i.e. an actual deity out there, and the ambiguity is never quite settled. For you, though, there are definitely no deities out there, or are they?*

Ultimately I have to be agnostic about this, but personally I don't believe that there are externally existing entities that exert some invisible spiritual force in our world.

*I am not sure if I believe in that either, but am also aware of the danger of reducing the whole thing to an existential predicament, where "it's all down to me", it's down to the heroic task of battling with demons. Trouble is, such existential view seems to fortify the ego.*

I can see how that *could* be read into some of what I've written and said but it should be clear from my writing that this process is not one that can operate independently of some *communal* setting.

*Sangha?*

Sangha, effectively. The notion of this process as one of the solitary hero battling against demons and forces is one that you can read in some of the early Mahayana texts. I don't say this in the book as it is something I have only discovered more recently. This idea of the *conquest* of Mara, of the Buddha *overcoming* Mara before the enlightenment, is not *found* in the early canon. It's utilized iconographically in the Theravadin. As an actual event within the Buddha's life, you only get this in the later Mahayana texts. I

think what Mahayana Buddhism does in some ways is in fact to elevate the heroic stature of the Buddha as the perfect person as it were...

*Omniscient, omnipotent etc*

Yes, whereas I think originally there is very little sense of that at all. Rather, Mara is simply seen as a *given* within the world. Whether you are enlightened or deluded, you are constantly subject to ‘forces’, if you want to put it that way, within and outside you, that are continuously threatening to undermine or trick you into some kind of stasis. My sense of the Buddha/Mara dichotomy is that it is *not* a dichotomy; there is no duality there, there are simply different modalities and possibilities opening up in every situation which can either close you down – or close your community down, your society – bring to a dysfunctional stasis, *or* you and your community are able rise to the challenge of that conflict by thinking otherwise, by going beyond that limited, habitual, and reactive pattern.

#### LET US COMPARE MYTHOLOGIES

*It seems though that whatever we do we are at all times under the spell of a particular mythology.*

That is true, and I don’t see how you can step out of that. If you do so, you are simply – perhaps unbeknownst to yourself – constructing yet another mythology.

*It is a fine line, and you seem to be straddling an ambiguous path. It would appear that your thinking is heading towards the paradigms of science, evolution, and reason. Instead, you make quite clear that science is one of the available mythologies.*

Absolutely.

*England, where I lived for the past 16 years is proud of thinking itself the most secular society in the world. I wonder if such thing is really possible. Maybe a “secular society”, with its belief-system rooted in science and reason, is itself a myth.*

At the moment there is a lot of debate here on this issue of secularity. France is an avowedly secular state, but if you look at the way in which secularism is defended, it is very similar to the way in which fundamentalists defend their positions. Secularism is certainly prone to the same kind of distortions, power games and self-delusions as anything else. Nonetheless, that does not mean that one has to recognize secularism, Buddhism, or Christianity as equals. I would argue for a *secular* Buddhism: *secular* in the literal sense as belonging to this world, this *time*. Buddhism has to free itself from a belief in a world of multiple realms, multiple lifetimes, reincarnating consciousnesses. These things are all very well, and perhaps in a kind of symbolic fashion can continue to serve quite adequately, as long as we see that it is a mythic and symbolic way of thinking. I would prefer to get rid of it altogether and to focus the core values of Buddhism, namely wisdom and compassion, on to the sufferings that is in evidence here in this world, both now as we are alive and also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of its continuation after our death. I'd define secular in that way ... I am not sure what a pure secularism would mean; there would always be some indemonstrable assumptions of which one's views would be based ... probably those of science or scientism. But I feel that Buddhism is particularly suited to secularisation, but it would be Buddhist secularism or a secular Buddhism; it wouldn't be secularism *tout court*.

*Would it still look Buddhist? And would the Buddha recognize it?*

Well, bringing the Buddha in is a rather dubious move. The Buddha is a historical figure, a product of his time and place. You could say the same thing about Zen. When Buddhism went to China, and found itself interacting with indigenous traditions like Taoism, would the Buddha have recognized that as Buddhism? Would he recognize Lin –Chi as a Buddhist?

*Personally, I am not too worried whether he would recognize him or not.*

The question is an important one, though. It is certainly true that for many Buddhists would be unacceptable to dismiss the things I have just dismissed and *remain* Buddhist. They would say “You can’t have Buddhism if you don’t have a multi-life perspective, if you don’t have a multi-realm perspective, if you don’t believe in some kind of spiritual entity that survives death and goes on into another birth. If you take all that out, you no longer have Buddhism.” I disagree; and it’s a very theoretical disagreement, a theological disagreement. The question really is, though, can Buddhism as a social and communal entity survive that surgery? I don’t know, to be frank.

*And perhaps, like any highly accomplished cultural phenomenon, it would include and understand - even welcome - its own demise, it would be aware of its own impermanence. Perhaps Buddhism will fold up, and it’s not such a big deal after all if it does...*

That is in fact the *official* view...

*Didn’t know that!*

It is widely recognized that Buddhism is not based on some kind of revelation which is true for all times but that is an impermanent process that will only sustain itself provided certain conditions in the world are met.

## NOT-TWO

*I’d like to go back to a point that is perhaps my root question with regards to your book. Your mention of the ‘vicious circle’ of samsara reminded me of Nietzsche’s vision of the ‘eternal recurrence’. His own experience of it was translated into boundless, if tragic, appreciation of life. He is saying, ‘I am willing to repeat this very life eternally, if necessary. And to some escape into a hypothetical, reified nirvana I prefer samsara. I choose samsara, give me samsara any day...*

That’s right. Nietzsche’s idea is very different.

*Fine, but I’d like to use the metaphor of the eternal recurrence, if I may, to pose a further question: is it not dualistic to think that I can get out of the circle and create a*

*path of liberation? And moreover, could the desire for liberation stem from a lack of appreciation of samsara?*

(Chuckles) I think the reality is, we are always in both. Trouble is, if you set these things up as competing absolutes, then you've already fallen into the trap. We need to look at this from a more experiential basis: there are times in my life, in the life of a community and society where the vitality has been lost. You might be doing a lot of things, but going nowhere. You get into a rut, a circle of repetition which is the last thing from Nietzsche's *amor fati* (literally *love of destiny*, embracing karma) It is indeed the total *loss* of *Amor*. It is deadness in life; then again, Mara is death, is lifelessness. In those moments you cannot even conceive of a path without accepting that there is a condition to break free from. You can't have one without the other. The point of the book is the inseparability of Buddha and Mara, of samsara and nirvana, of a path from the obstruction on the path. The two things cannot intelligibly be thought as though they have any kind of independent existence.

*Something hit me when you mentioned the loss of Amor. I was reminded of Italian poet and novelist Cesare Pavese. He spoke of, and suffered from, disamore, of disaffection for the world: a malady, the modernist malady perhaps, a spiritual sickness stemming from the lack of any true engagement with life despite all the busy-ness, despite all the shopping, including spiritual shopping ... I see your point; one thing is for me to live with a sense of joyful purpose, and quite another going around like the wound-up toy of my compulsions and uncreative behaviours. Again, you seem to point quite clearly at the existential dimension as central.*

For me "Buddhism is an existentialism", to paraphrase Sartre. It is a *cultural* movement – religious, if you wish – that is concerned with the questions of existence. That is its exclusive concern, and the Buddha's life is to me an embodiment of that, albeit framed in the metaphysical context of ancient India.

## SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

*Would it then include social engagement? You seem a little cautious on that front. We had this discussion before, at the time of your book *Buddhism without Beliefs*. Some would say, and I tend to agree, that capitalism is a clear expression of Mara and that, operating as we are in the relative world, we need to make a stand at the time when crucial choices to be made, particularly in the light of the present international climate, e.g., with the current Bush administration installed in the White House. I understand that you value what western democracies have to offer. Nevertheless, an understanding of Buddhism as existentialism would make a critique of the status quo and some degree of social engagement necessary.*

I agree, and I feel that my work is moving in that direction. I admit that it is not a theme to which I have given a primary focus. What I am working on at the moment is inexorably moving in that direction. For me the eightfold path is a model that already includes social engagement. It entails engagement with the other; it is not adequate that a human life can be realized and complete in spiritual isolation.

Current attempts at a Buddhist social theory are all very well in principle. I can also argue that capitalism is based on greed, anger and delusion, but such argument does not exactly point to a workable alternative. In fact, what you often find with engaged Buddhist writers is that their Marxist T-shirts are only slightly obscured by their Buddhist robes. Very often you find militant Marxists who become disillusioned with the materialism of political approaches, adopt Buddhism and then somehow bring the Marxism along.

I do admire the work of these people though, as I feel I have somehow failed to bring that element in my own work. Engaged Buddhism is very important work, but unfortunately I have not yet seen it go very far.

## DON'T MENTION THE SELF

*I feel that the existential dimension and the social engagement can be antidotes to what Blake used to call the “satanic sin of self-hood”. You yourself quote Paul Tillich who wrote that anything conditional that is interpreted as unconditional is prone to idolatry. It is strange and at times upsetting to register the emergence of cult mentality within western Buddhism, particularly in America.*

I like Tillich’s quote because it captures what happens when religion reifies itself. I find it very ironic with Buddhism that it’s a religion that goes on talking about how everything is unsatisfactory, impermanent, devoid of essential nature, and then excludes itself from its own pronouncements. It fails to acknowledge that Buddhism too undergoes change, that the structures of Buddhism in the world are necessarily imperfect. They are flawed, they are already somehow broken. It fails to acknowledge that Buddhism itself has not independent self-existence, that is an emergent property of certain trends of religious and spiritual force interacting with Indian culture, Chinese, Western culture, etc., and what emerges contingently, we call “Buddhism”. The ‘ism’ easily suggests a ‘thing’.

Moreover, Buddhism has overstated this notion of ‘no-self’ to the point that it has obscured the understanding of self as a dynamic, enriching process that individual lives accomplish. ‘Self’ has almost become a taboo in Buddhism. Because it has such commitment to ‘no-self’, it has very rarely, if at all, considered and developed a theory of the functional reality of the self.

*There is no ‘studying the self’ before the self is forgotten...*

Exactly. You can’t say anything good about the ‘s’ word. It’s just about negation. There are passages, even in the early texts, suggesting another picture altogether. In a verse I came upon recently, verse 80 in the Dhammapadam, the Buddha says: “Just as a farmer carves channels in his field to irrigate it; just as the maker of arrows fashions an arrow; just as a

carpenter shapes a piece of wood, so does the *pundita* – the sage or wise person – tames *the self*.

I think this is a very interesting idea. Equating the self to the piece of wood, the arrow, the field, makes it into the object with which one works in a transformative way. All translations in English of that verse lose that point by making ‘self’ a reflective function of the verb: “...so the wise person trains *himself*.” But in the Pali, the word self is in the accusative form, exactly the same grammatical relationship to the verb as the field, the arrow, and the block of wood. It is very noteworthy to see how very learned and well-intentioned translators will miss that point. It is almost as if a knee-jerk, a default reaction is betrayed. Also, in his critique of the cast system, the Buddha says, “The Brahmin is not a Brahmin but what he is but by what he does”, and “A thief, a soldier, a king are not what they are because of their birth, but because of what they do”. You have what we would nowadays call a ‘performative’ conception of self. The notion of *no self*, therefore, is not about denying that the self exists, which is frankly absurd...

*So we are not refining the self only in order to use it as an empty vessel?*

What I think ‘no self’ is getting at – and I think the only Buddhist teacher who seems to have made this point is Tzong Khapa, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan lama. He wrote a great deal about this. He was in the tradition in which I was originally trained.

My understanding of no-self is that the self that is negated is precisely what prevents you and me from unfolding. There is a dynamic concept of self that is very liberating and the way in which that dynamic self is liberated is through realizing that there is nothing fixed or essential about it. And *that* is no-self, emptiness. Unfortunately, Buddhists in general don’t seem to have paid sufficient attention to that point.

*Self has become a dirty word...*

Yes, and because early translators have rendered *atta* as *soul*, soul has become a dirty word too. And that's really ridiculous. There is no way that the Greek *psyche* (*chitta*) has anything to do with the notion of *atman* that is negated in Buddhism.

*Psyche is not me, a monad continuing its self-supporting existence throughout eternity...*

Atman and Chitta are too very different ideas

*You quote the Buddha as saying that the path is going against the stream.*

It is not the path that goes against the stream, it's the Dharma. What the Buddha teaches, what he says goes against the stream.

*You write that it is "not repressing, nor acting out; neither flight, nor fixation. A third way." Jung talks of *opus contra naturam*, of work against nature. Studying the self is for him working against nature...*

I like Jung for that reason.

*Would it be too far-fetched to put those two definitions, the Buddha's and Jung's, closely together?*

I don't think so. If I understand Jung correctly, he sees the archetypes as rooted in the instincts and the process of individuation as one of freeing oneself from the predominance of the archetypes.

*It seems a long way, though, from the current spiritual platitudes of 'go with the flow', 'be yourself' and 'follow your heart'...*

It does, and with some legitimacy. It is a very important point to make. It's all too fluffy and woolly-minded to somehow believe that everything that is intuitive is good, true and beautiful and coming from some mystical place within. Of course ... Buddhism or any tradition would value spontaneity and an intuitive grasp of something that is not coming from reason or logic. But where does it come from? How do we know it is not the prompting of the demonic, that is not just another trick? It's very difficult to say. At the moment, it might almost be impossible to have any certainty around that. But that is a reality in which we live all the time. The future is unknown, we

are heading into it and we are called upon to act, to make choices, decisions, to live according to what we trust to be good and true. And yet, the more we do that, the more we become aware of how there are tendencies within ourselves that however much we think we understand them, they insinuate their way back into our motives, back into our worldview, and the whole process becomes once more co-opted by...

*We are back into the circle?*

We come back into the circle and find that this wonderful spiritual path we think we have been doing for the sake of all sentient beings turns out to be a rather self-absorbed way to make us feel good about ourselves!

*The high point in your book is when you attempt a definition of the path. It reminded me of a Gary Snyder's poem, "The Trail is not a Trail":*

*I drove down the Freeway  
And turned off at an exit  
And went along the highway  
Til it came to a sideroad  
Drove up the sideroad  
Til it turned to a dirt road  
Full of bumps, and stopped.  
Walked up a trail  
But the trail got rough  
And it faded away –  
Out in the open,  
Everywhere to go.*

*I find it wonderful but disconcerting too. Sometimes I wish there was a clearly defined path, neatly signposted, like on the Swiss Alps...*

True. I have been working with that metaphor of the open path. And Snyder, I feel, is very much on that same wavelength from what I have read

of his writings, and also because he embraces the issue of engagement. I  
admire his work very much.