



Photo Stephen Batchelor

the twins faith & doubt

In a recent tour of the US, writer and teacher **STEPHEN BATCHELOR** visited FPMT International Office in Taos, New Mexico. He shared his views with **NANCY PATTON** on agnosticism, and whether one can have both faith and doubt about the Buddhist path.

NP: *I've heard you describe your agnostic views as deep agnosticism. How does that differ from the accepted view of agnosticism (which, interestingly, you say, is a term coined by Thomas Huxley, in the late 1880s, so he could have a label like his fellow philosophers who were Christians, Rationalists and the like.)*

SB: Deep agnosticism, for me, brings together the idea of agnosticism as found in Western secular culture, and a kind of not-knowing that is cultivated in the practice of certain kinds of Buddhist meditation. In the practice of Zen, for example, you ask yourself a question: "What is this?" You ask this not as an intellectual enquiry, but rather as a way of opening up the primary question that your life poses to you. In other words, "Who am I?" Ultimately, this is the heart of all Buddhist practice – to find out what is the nature of the self, of reality, of consciousness, or however we would frame that.

But, of course, every time you ask a question, you are implicitly saying that you do not know something. That kind of not-knowing is an agnosis taken down to a deeper pitch. The not-knowing of agnosticism, as it is often understood

today, is a lack of interest in knowing, or having opinions about, certain questions like, "What happens after death? Where did the universe come from? Is there a God?" An agnostic is someone who says, "I just don't know."

I am interested in taking that "don't know" into a deep existential enquiry which seems to be very close to what you find in China with the idea of *wu-hsin*, which means "no mind." It also has parallels with the whole nature of enquiry into emptiness. In the teachings of Lama Tsongkhapa, for example, you apply what's called *dondam choje kyi rigpa*, which means an analysis into the ultimate nature of things. And that too is a form of intense meditative enquiry, which seeks to critique the false sense of ego that we all suffer from and, in exploding that illusion, opens up the world as radically contingent and changing. That enquiry is likewise starting from a place where you are saying, "I don't know the nature of reality."

So deep agnosticism offers a way in which we can provide the secular tradition of agnosticism with a kind of spiritual depth. It also affirms something profoundly agnostic about the nature of many kinds of Buddhist enquiry practice.

NP: *Buddhists are expected to have a certain degree of faith about the teachings. How does this fit with the questioning of deep agnosticism, or even simple doubts that crop up for students who might feel they are still just plodding along waiting for 'faith' to strike?*

SB: I am not so convinced that plodding along is somehow inferior to a state of great faith. When we use a word like 'faith' we have to be very clear as to what we mean. Classical Buddhism, as taught in the Lam-Rim, understands faith as having three aspects.

The first is a longing for transcendence, a dissatisfaction with how you are now, and a yearning to fulfill an unrealized potential within yourself. That longing might focus on the idea of the Buddha, or enlightenment, or wisdom, or compassion – values that you long to realize in your life. In Tibetan Buddhism much of this longing is mediated through the figure of the lama. One has great faith in the lama's capacity to guide you towards the realization of enlightenment and compassion and wisdom and so on. Tibetan Buddhism in particular gives enormous importance to guru devotion, and so when you take refuge as a Tibetan Buddhist you start with *Lama la kyab su chhi*, (I take refuge in the lama.) In other forms of Buddhism you simply take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The second aspect is a quality of openness and radiance – a mind that admires positive values, but is also a mind that we experience momentarily when the turmoil of our usual chattering nonsense subsides, for example, in meditation. You get a hint of some greater capacity in your own mind. Faith is therefore a kind of inner lucidity that is not so much focused on a lama or a Buddha, but is actually an affirmation of one's own inner capacity for self-transformation.

Then there is the faith which is a belief. This means to hold in one's mind, consciously, certain ideas and beliefs, or certain articles of faith. It may simply be a certain working hypothesis, such as, "I trust that this process of meditation will work." In that respect, it would be part of one's faith.

You can think of faith as a complex of different functions, rather than as a single state that you either have or don't have. You can also see that faith is actually a practice, that you can cultivate this longing, this lucidity, and you can clarify the conceptual structure that gives you a framework for practice and behavior. Faith is necessarily indispensable to the process, but how that is realized in a given practitioner can vary enormously.

I believe one can't have faith without a degree of doubt. When I trained in Zen in Korea, my teacher emphasized three aspects that needed to be cultivated: great faith, great doubt and great courage. The tradition also requires a willingness to open yourself to what is questionable about your life and your experiences, to be always very much on the edge of what you don't know, and not to let yourself get trapped inside a set of metaphysical beliefs. It does require a great deal of courage; it is not easy to hold faith and doubt in that kind of dynamic living tension.

If you have faith without doubt, you are liable to become trapped in a closed belief system. If you have doubt without faith, then you risk slipping into a kind of nihilistic skepticism. Somehow one needs to hold the two. That's my personal opinion; not all Buddhists would share that. But it is certainly the way that one Zen tradition practices, and it's an approach that I find very amenable.

NP: *Do you see any danger in adopting an eclectic approach to a spiritual practice, taking a bit of this and a bit of that?*

SB: From a personal practitioner's point of view, it's important to ground oneself in a particular tradition before one starts trying to incorporate other practices. I have no particular preference; people are free to choose as they wish. But whether you practice as a Tibetan, Vajrayana, Zen, Theravadan or other Buddhist, you need to be firmly rooted in one that gives you an experiential ground before you bring in other elements or explore other approaches.

However, I do see a danger that one could get stuck, somehow feeling that 'our' tradition is intrinsically superior to others. We may not say that in so many words, but it strikes me as strange that someone who has been practicing for 20 or 30 years would take little, if any, interest in other forms of Buddhism, particularly in the modern Western situation where we are exposed for the first time in Buddhist history to a diversity of Buddhist traditions in a single country, be it America, Australia or one in Western Europe.

We have to acknowledge that, as Westerners, not all of us will fit neatly into the forms of practice that were essentially the result of the genius of Tibetan, Japanese, Thai, Chinese, or Sri Lankan culture. In my own case, I found that my practice of Buddhism, which began with the Tibetan Gelug approach, got to a point where I felt that certain issues that I was facing in my practice were not being adequately answered. I found that the practice of questioning and not-knowing was developed and cultivated in the Zen school in a way that I could not find in a Tibetan tradition. As a consequence the Zen approach met my needs very well.

NP: *The late Lama Yeshe constantly exhorted his Tibetan Buddhist students to 'check up, check up, check up.' Didn't this help?*

SB: My teacher Geshe Rabten, who was also Lama Yeshe's teacher, emphasized that a lot too. Certainly in both the Mahayana and Theravadan schools there are texts that emphasize the importance of not taking things at face value but always pursuing an enquiry that is true to your own needs.

The problem with that is: How do you know when you have checked up enough? Let's say that you spend years – in my case six years as a monk – doing a lot of checking up. I found that the conclusions I was coming to did not accord with what I was being taught. For example, this whole business of reincarnation: I had to acknowledge that, fundamentally, I could

not take this belief on board. It was not true to what I could feel to be rationally tenable, and I found very little empirical evidence. I also felt it was an unnecessary belief, anyway, for the practice I was doing. But from the Gelug point of view I had obviously not checked up enough. If I were to pursue my checking up, then since Lama Tsongkhapa and the lamas of the tradition are teaching the truth, obviously I would come to that conclusion. But I didn't, so what do you do with that?

I don't believe in rebirth, but I don't disbelieve either. An agnostic position is to accept that I don't know whether it is the case or not. Yet people tend to think that this is to deny it. You are not: It's very different. It is a genuine holding of a very important question.

NP: *Are Buddhists by definition atheists?*

SB: Atheists do not believe in God, or, rather, they deny the existence of God. They are reacting against theism. Buddhism has never rebelled against theism. In that sense it's non-theistic rather than atheistic.

Atheism and agnosticism are both responsive to the crisis of faith in Christianity in the nineteenth century. We've inherited a skepticism, a lack of faith in our ancestral religions, Christianity and Judaism particularly. Many people who are drawn to Buddhism are seeking a spirituality that does not require theistic belief. But that does not mean they are atheists. A Buddhist can simply not be concerned with questions about God. Buddha spoke for 40 years without ever using a term that we would translate as "God."

NP: *Robert Thurman (page 29) talks about benevolent beings who are more powerful than humans who are trying to take care of us: 'angels' or 'non-omnipotent gods.' Do you believe in them?*

SB: Buddhism could be seen as polytheistic, believing in a plurality of life forms, not all of which are accessible to most human beings. Indian cosmology describes a complex series of gods or devas, some of the realm of desire, some of the realm of form, some of the realm of formlessness.

Among those devas is Brahma, who is considered to be the overlord of the realm of form. In the early Buddhist texts, Buddha is often found talking with or about Brahma, usually in a somewhat mocking tone. Certainly traditional Buddhism accepts the plurality of gods, no question of that, but it doesn't take the gods as seriously as the gods would like to be taken. That I think is the difference. But whether one has to embrace polytheism to be a Buddhist I would also question. I would tend to interpret the appearance of these gods in the Buddhist discourses as symbolically rather than literally true. I think they are saying something about Buddha's experiences at that time, but whether that implies that we need to believe in different realms, and that the Buddha somehow leaves earth and zooms up to another realm, that I would query.

NP: *Does evil have an entity in Buddhism, a devil figure like Satan in Christianity?*

SB: Among the gods that traditional Buddhists believe in is the god Mara, literally the god of desire (Kamadeva) who rules over the world of the sensual existence (*kamadhatu*.) Mara is represented, figuratively, in the form of this god, and symbolically as everything that stands in the way of our search for enlightenment. The word *mara* in Sanskrit literally means 'the killer.' Mara is all of the limited and limiting fixations, like ignorance, attachment and hatred that lock us into a deluded frame of mind.

But Mara is also understood as the phenomenal world itself: What is called *skandhamara* in Sanskrit. The mara of phenomenal existence is a recognition that the very world we inhabit, our bodies, our minds, the world of the senses, the biosphere, the earth, the solar system, is all unstable and unreliable and unpredictable. Our existence in the sensory world is prone to illness, accidents and aging and ultimately will come to an end, thereby cutting off the opportunities for enlightenment afforded by this precious human life.

Mara is thus also a symbol of death. This is beautifully described in the Tibetan wheel of life where you have the twelve links round the edge, the six realms inside and the three poisons at the hub driving the whole process. But the wheel is held in the arms of a demon and that's Mara in the form of *Yamamara*. If you look carefully at the wheel of life you'll see that the fangs of the demon hang over the edge of the wheel, so the wheel is in the mouth of the Lord of Death. That mouth can snap shut at any time and then propel you into another world – if you believe in rebirth.

One of the striking things about Mara is how closely he resembles the Jewish, Christian and Islamic figures of Satan. Perhaps it's one of the strongest bridges between the monotheistic faiths and Buddhism. We don't find the figure of Mara in Hinduism or in any of the Chinese religions: They understand evil as a plurality of negative spirits, ghostly figures, and so forth. It's only in Buddhism and monotheistic faiths that the forces of evil are configured or crystallized into a single figurative entity. ☸

Stephen Batchelor was born in Scotland and received his education in England and in Buddhist monasteries in India, Switzerland, and Korea. He is a co-founder of Sharpham College for Buddhist Studies and Contemporary Enquiry in Devon, England. He has translated and written several books on Buddhism, including *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, *Alone with Others*, *The Faith to Doubt*, *The Tibet Guide*, *The Awakening of the West*, *Buddhism Without Belief*, and *Verses from the Center*. He lectures and conducts meditation retreats worldwide and lives in France.

