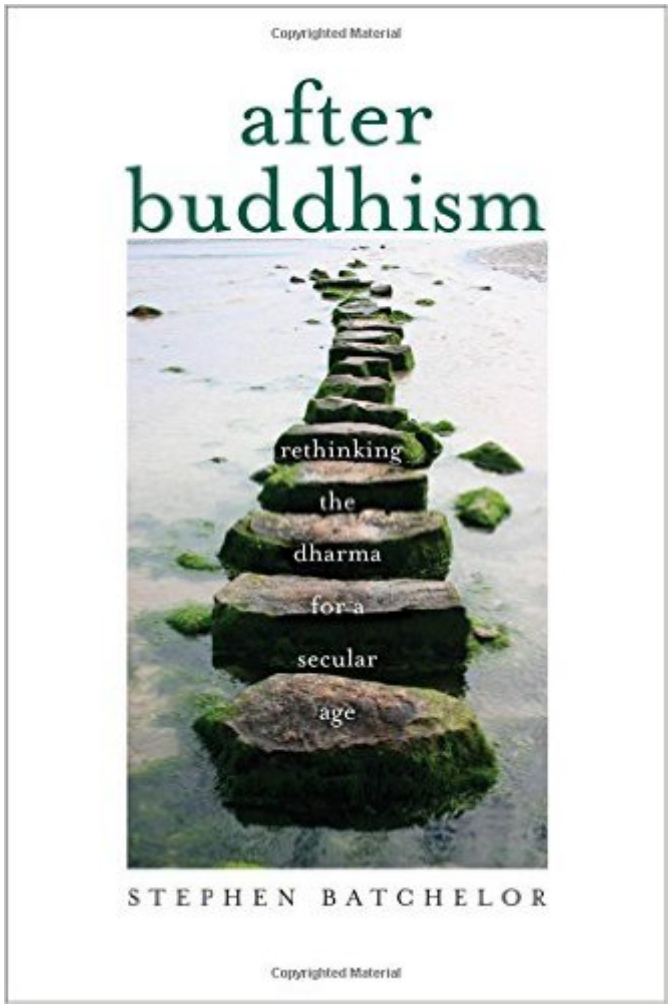
After Buddhism: Rethinking The Dharma For A Secular Age



Synopsis

A renowned Buddhist teacherâ ™s magnum opus, based on his fresh reading of the traditionâ ™s earliest texts Some twenty-five centuries after the Buddha started teaching, his message continues to inspire people across the globe, including those living in predominantly secular societies. What does it mean to adapt religious practices to secular contexts? Â Stephen Batchelor, an internationally known author and teacher, is committed to a secularized version of the Buddhaâ ™s teachings. The time has come, he feels, to articulate a coherent ethical, contemplative, and philosophical vision of Buddhism for our age. After Buddhism, the culmination of four decades of study and practice in the Tibetan, Zen, and Theravada traditions, is his attempt to set the record straight about who the Buddha was and what he was trying to teach. Combining critical readings of the earliest canonical texts with narrative accounts of five members of the Buddhaâ ™s inner circle, Batchelor depicts the Buddha as a pragmatic ethicist rather than a dogmatic metaphysician. He envisions Buddhism as a constantly evolving culture of awakening whose long survival is due to its capacity to reinvent itself and interact creatively with each society it encounters. Â This original and provocative book presents a new framework for understanding the remarkable spread of Buddhism in todayâ ™s globalized world. It also reminds us of what was so startling about the Buddhaâ ™s vision of human flourishing. Â

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Customer Reviews

If you are reading reviews of this book to determine whether it’s worth your time, my answer is yes: I

think most readers with an interest in the dharma, except perhaps those unshakably committed to traditional Buddhist dogmas on karma and reincarnation, will find much value here. This is an intelligent, serious, and engaging work whose ideas the author likely pondered and refined over a period of years, a learned but vibrant formulation of a secular dharma that hones in on tasks we can undertake to live compassionately and authentically. At the same time, this secular dharma dispenses with metaphysical and ontological claims that have scant bearing on liberating ourselves from the prison of reactivity. Someone who is drowning has little use for a lesson on the chemistry of water. What is needed is a teaching on how to breathe in and out of the water, and how to move and thrive in a dynamic seascape of ever-shifting currents, not a discourse on covalent and hydrogen bonds or molecular orbital theory.The book is organized into eleven chapters that alternate in shiplap fashion, an expository chapter on the dharma followed by a chapter on an individual associated with the Buddha. The latter are helpful in providing a historical context of the Buddha's life and times. In all, five characters are profiled: Mahanama, a cousin of Buddha and a governor of Sakiya; Pasenadi, king of Kosala; Sunakkhatta, a Judas Iscariot figure; Jivaka, a physician; and Ananda, the Buddha's attendant.Batchelor's approach to the surviving Buddhist corpus borrows from Biblical textual criticism, attempting to suss out from the massive Pali canon parts that may be attributed to early Buddhist tradition and even the historical Buddha himself, hereafter referred to as Gotama. Batchelor declares in the first chapter: "My starting point in dealing with dogmatic statements is to bracket off anything attributed to Gotama that could just as well have been said by another wanderer, Jain monk, or brahmin priest of the same period." That is, utterances inconsistent with Indic beliefs prevalent during that period are more likely to be authentic, to not have been emended by a later hand. Batchelor continues, "The bracketing off of such beliefs does not, in my opinion, result in a fragmentary and emasculated dharma. Instead, the result is what appears to be an entirely adequate ethical, contemplative, and philosophical framework for leading a flourishing life in this (italics) world."Gotama, as described by Batchelor, stresses the undertaking of existential tasks rather than cerebral, speculative, and abstract elaborations on metaphysics or even universal ethics. More on the latter shortly. Leaning on Pali philologist K.R. Norman's observations on the semantic oddity involving the use of "ariya-saccam" or "noble truth" in Gotama's first alleged discourse, Batchelor recasts the four noble truths as the four tasks instead. In other words, he asks us to lift our gaze from the metaphysics of the Truths of the existence, origin, and cessation of suffering, and instead reframe them as four tasks we can undertake to negotiate both an unpredictable world that is often traumatizing as well as our reactivity to it. As an experienced craftsman deploys an array of skills in his trade, so does a wise person skillfully practice the four

tasks to flourish in this world. In Batchelor's reformulation of the four noble truths, they become the following tasks: 1) Embrace [the totality of] life; 2) Let go of what[ever reactivity that] arises; 3) See its ceasing; 4) Act!The foundation for performing the four tasks is the two-fold ground of causality and nirvana. Causality: this is so because that is so. Knowing that this leads to that enables us to follow the path toward liberation. Likewise, when you see that letting go of reactivity opens a space for a peace that is unmolested by burning impulses, when you have tasted this nirvana in which flames of impulse are extinguished, if only temporarily, it is possible to enter the stream and begin swimming toward liberation. To enter this stream, one must have courage to see past the shaky grounds on which we often rest our identity, whether they are nationality, ethnicity, gender, career, educational background, or favorite sports team. The grounds of causality and nirvana are more elusive yet offer a much surer footing for a sane and fulfilling life.What kind of a person was the historical Gotama who emerges from the suttas and vinayas? Stripped of the supernatural and dogmatic elements that Batchelor deems later accretions influenced by Indic traditions, the Gotama we see is foremost a pragmatist. Attentive to the specifics of a situation, he abandons claims to ultimate truths or universal ethics. He says, Ã¢Â ÂœOf that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And of that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists." It seems that Gotama did not toss and turn at night agonizing over metaphysical questions! Gotama's ethics, as well, are guided by core values but eschew absolutism. For the monastic community, Gotama allowed for the revocation of minor rules after his passing, and left it up to the mendicants themselves to fashion out what that means. Of philosophy, ethics, and jurisprudence that seek to hammer out universally applicable principles, Gotama would probably say that they lazily elide over the all-important contextual details that guide us toward the most wise and loving course of action for a given situation. Nor is Gotama a detached ascetic. He regularly interacts with the outside world, and springs to action where there is a need. In this book we see him negotiating delicate political terrains. We also see him as a healer. Upon discovering a dysentery-stricken mendicant who lay in his own excrement, neglected by his fellow mendicants, Gotama cleans off the fecal waste and bathes him, after which he scolds the sick man's cohorts: "If you do not tend to each other, then who is there who will tend to you? Whoever would tend to me, he should tend to the sick." Gotama, as we glimpse him in these anecdotes, is compassionate, practical, and engaged.In the closing chapter, A Culture of Awakening, Batchelor champions a dharma that speaks urgently to the needs of our times. The project Gotama envisioned was like rebuilding upon the ruins of a newly discovered ancient city. Here, informed by the freedom of nirvana, individuals come together to build a culture in which humans can truly flourish. Realizing

this core vision does not, Batchelor argues, require an unquestioning belief in doctrines such as karma and reincarnation. He asks, in a secular western civilization without long traditions in which reincarnation was taken as a given, in which scientific narratives have overtaken religious ones, does belief in reincarnation help us accomplish the four tasks? Batchelor concludes the book with his Ten Theses of Secular Dharma, most of whose credos have been reflected in this review, but which also espouses sanghas, or spiritual communities, without hierarchies.While I cannot judge the quality of Batchelor's Pali scholarship, the book seemed to be densely woven with learned and carefully nuanced arguments. I found the author an able and sensitive reader, and many times in the book I was surprised by how much information he was able to extract from seemingly insignificant Pali fragments. Batchelor's conjectures and conclusions regarding the texts are necessarily speculative, but I believe they are informed and intelligent. His textual approach to arrive at the historical Gotama is a welcome one, and in my opinion, badly needed in Buddhist studies. I also believe that his vision of a secular dharma is sensible and healthy. Buddhism has survived across centuries and continents because it was able to adapt to the needs of its practitioners, though its core teachings remained intact. Batchelor is wise to ask what kind of dharma follows after Buddhism in a western culture in which the idea of mindfulness has spread like wildfire, but one that is unlikely to embrace the idea of reincarnation in literal rather than metaphorical terms. Additionally, I found the portraits of Gotama and assorted characters in this book vivid and compelling. Here we see these historical people fleshed out, with their ideologies, allegiances, temperaments, and limitations. We gasp in horror as Gotama is helpless to stop the genocidal onslaught of his kinsmen by a vengeful king. We witness a monk of senior position, disappointed in Gotama's lack of supernatural abilities, turn traitorous and furiously denounce his former teacher. In the chapter on Ananda, we sympathize with Gotama's attendant as he is humiliated and marginalized in the power struggle that ensues Gotama's death.I do disagree with Batchelor on a few counts, most notably on the meaning of Gotama's awakening. I'll discuss only the latter here. Was Gotama's awakening the complete and eternal eradication of the impulses of greed, hatred, and delusion? Clearly not, as the Pali canon describes his multiple encounters with Mara, the personified metaphor of these forces, even after his enlightenment. Batchelor appears resigned to the impossibility of a lasting nirvana: "The problem with the three fires of greed, hatred, and confusion does not lie in their being hot but in the havoc they cause when they get out of control. ... The parable of the snake might suggest that these fires are not to be extinguished but regulated. Since emotions appear to be rooted deep in our limbic system as the legacy of biological evolution, regulation might be all that is possible and feasible." For Batchelor, then, nirvanic freedom is not something to work toward, but available in

each moment we choose to disentangle ourselves from reactivity. If progress is made, it is by habituation.My own experiences have led me to a different take. While I agree with Batchelor that we are inescapably subject to features of our mammalian physiology, I do not believe that nirvana is something merely glimpsed through practice, a momentary peace that flits like a butterfly in and out of our lives. Traumas we've experienced dissociate us physically from our bodies and temporally, and consequently 1) we lack full awareness of the felt sense of living in our bodies, and 2) our thoughts constantly stray from the present, either wandering toward fantasies or fears regarding the future, or dwelling upon glories, regrets, or injuries of the past. Whatever evolutionary instincts we are born with for the sake of self-preservation, trauma adds to the fuel of Mara's fire. In my opinion, Gotama's instruction on mindfulness of the breath is a prescription for the undoing, the healing, of the forces of trauma, to bring us back into our bodies in this moment. I believe that creating and sustaining this internal milieu opened up the space for the healing of the traumas of Gotama's past until there was no more to be undone. I say this based on my ongoing experience with the healing of traumas. A practice of meditation on and off the cushion has been the foundation allowing me to slowly process the traumas of my past, and little by little, I find that I am becoming less reactive. My days tend to be more present, I feel more connected to my body, and compassion flows more naturally. Even in emotionally volatile moments, it is becoming easier to slip back into the sublimity of the present moment. In short the fires of greed, anger, and confusion now burn less avidly in my interior landscape than they did a year ago, and much less so than they did, say, three years ago. Given my personal trajectory, I can only extrapolate that there must be an eventual end to the flames of trauma, at which point the limbic system may still stir and rattle, but with considerably attenuated intensity. This is my understanding of, and partial experience with, nirvana.Finally, for those who might be interested, recordings of many of Batchelor's talks are freely available on the dharma seed website. I have listened to a few over the past several days, and they address many of the themes from this book. I wish you well on your path.

Exceptionally well done- in addition to skillfully framing Buddhism in secular light, the author does a very nice job of breaking down the nuances of 'Dharma.' The author spends his pages portraying the ideas of Buddhism in a way that showcases their useful qualities, irrespective of religious metaphysics. More than most religions, Buddhism focuses its philosophy on how to live well and be happy during this life through understanding of the causes of suffering inherent in the human condition - rather than on being happy later as a result of your 'work' during this life. For this reason, Buddhism seems to lend itself especially well to treatment as a secular philosophy.There's quite a

lot of history in the book. There is good discussion of what stories are probably historical and what can probably be attributed to religious editing over the years. This does involve a certain degree of educated speculation, which could be a criticism of this book. I thought he did a thoughtful job in his discussion, and put forth some thought provoking ideas.Definitely worth the read for anyone interested in learning more about Buddhist ideas, religiously inclined or otherwise.I would guess that this book would be challenging for someone with no knowledge of Buddhism, although it doesn't specifically presuppose any knowledge.

I am so blown away by the author's explanation of many familiar passages from the Pali Canon. I have been studying and practicing Buddhism for nearly 40 years, first as a religion, then not as a religion but as a mental discipline, then again as a religion..... anyway, I think you can see my point -- confusion comes from having so many competing views of what the Buddha actually taught. I am not a Pali scholar and so have had to rely on the various translations and interpretations out there but I am trained in a profession that is grounded in logic (the law) and that is what I find so appealing in this book. It has already answered some of my long term questions, e.g. what is the unborn? how is this different from the Hindu atman? how does this fit with the reference to anatman in other Buddhist teachings? I highly recommend.

Blossom of the Fine Dharma: (The Lotus Sutra) (Translations from the Asian Classics) What is the Dharma?: The essential teachings of the Buddha Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen’s Shobo Genzo The Path of Individual Liberation: The Profound Treasury of the Ocean of Dharma, Volume One