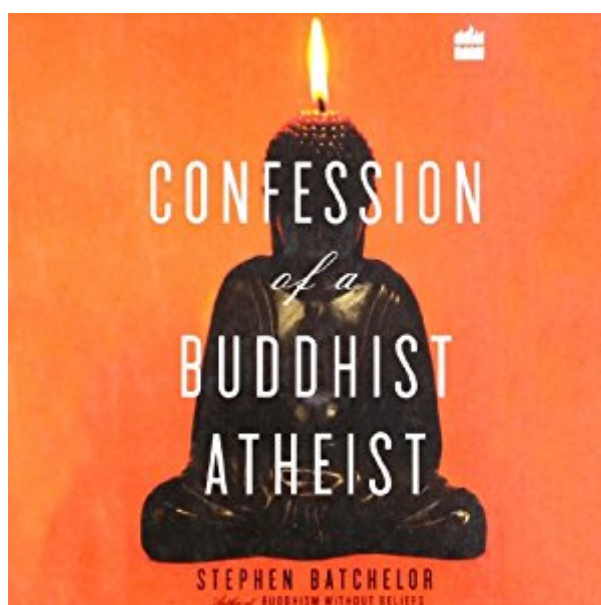


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# Confession Of A Buddhist Atheist



## Synopsis

Written with the same brilliance and boldness that made *Buddhism Without Beliefs* a classic in its field, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is Stephen Batchelor's account of his journey through Buddhism, which culminates in a groundbreaking new portrait of the historical Buddha. Stephen Batchelor grew up outside London and came of age in the 1960s. Like other seekers of his time, instead of going to college, he set off to explore the world. Settling in India, he eventually became a Buddhist monk in Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital-in-exile, and entered the inner circle of monks around the Dalai Lama. He later moved to a monastery in South Korea to pursue intensive training in Zen Buddhism. Yet the more Batchelor read about the Buddha, the more he came to believe that the way Buddhism was being taught and practiced was at odds with the actual teachings of the Buddha himself. Charting his journey from hippie to monk to lay practitioner, teacher, and interpreter of Buddhist thought, Batchelor reconstructs the historical Buddha's life, locating him within the social and political context of his world. In examining the ancient texts of the Pali Canon, the earliest record of the Buddha's life and teachings, Batchelor argues that the Buddha was a man who looked at human life in a radically new way for his time, more interested in the question of how human beings should live in this world than in notions of karma and the afterlife. According to Batchelor, the outlook of the Buddha was far removed from the piety and religiosity that has come to define much of Buddhism as we know it today. Both controversial and deeply personal, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is a fascinating exploration of a religion that continues to engage the West. Batchelor's insightful, deeply knowledgeable, and persuasive account will be an essential book for anyone interested in Buddhism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

At the end of "Confession of a Buddhist Atheist", Stephen Batchelor speaks briefly of the collage art he creates from found materials. This book is something of a collage, pieced together with three major themes, the whole forming a work that is complete and beautiful, with a wholly admirable integrity. The first theme is expressed as a memoir. Batchelor tells us, with just enough detail to bring the story to vivid life without distracting us from its narrative course, how he journeyed from a childhood in provincial England, raised without religious indoctrination by a single mother, through a classic '60s-style road trip, with plenty of drugs, little money and no clear end in mind, Eastward through Afghanistan and Pakistan to Daramsala, where the young Dalai Lama had recently settled with his community of exiled Tibetans, and where Batchelor first encountered the Buddhist thinking that would inform his life. He learned Tibetan, ordained as a monk in the Dalai Lama's Gelug tradition, and discovered the first of a series of teachers who would, through the next 30 years, conspire, albeit unknowingly, to form the person who has emerged as Stephen Batchelor, a very different person than any of them sought to form, but a person whose goodness and honesty would compel their admiration, being themselves good and honest people. In addition to Geshe Rabten, with whom Batchelor studied in India and later in Switzerland, those teachers included S.N. Goenta, from whom he learned the technique of mindfulness meditation (the fundamental practice of the Theravadin school of Buddhism), and Kusan Sunim, the Korean Zen master under whom Stephen practiced for seven years as a monk when his emerging doubts about the dogmatism of the Tibetan schools no longer allowed him, in good conscience, to stay with Geshe Rabten. Kusan Sunim, like Geshe Rabten, and like the Dalai Lama himself, with whom Batchelor was privileged to have close contact several times through those years, turned out to be attached to the rituals and texts of his particular tradition with an intensity that did not allow him to understand or accept the validity of the Dharma as Batchelor was increasingly coming to experience it. That first part of Batchelor's life ends with his decision to disrobe. He married Martine, a French woman whom he had met and come to love as the nun Songil at the monastery in Songgwangsa, and the two have been creating, ever since, a new way of being Buddhist teachers, without the protective authority of either a traditional sangha or an academic institution, but working from their continually deepening understanding of Buddhism, informed by meditative practice and far-ranging scholarship. The continuity of the memoir theme pretty much ends with Stephen and Martine's move back to the West. We learn some details

of their life, the friends they've made, the work they do, and the influences they've felt, but the thrust of the book turns to the second and third themes: first Stephen's cogent articulation of what he has come to understand as the fundamental message of Buddhism and the urgent relevance of that message to our lives; and, second, his long and perceptive attempt to recreate the biography of Siddhattha Gotama, the wealthy and privileged son of a Sakiyan nobleman who Awakened as the Buddha. Each theme--memoir, Dharma teaching, and historical biography--is present from the beginning and throughout, but, as in a collage, as the book proceeds, each theme, in turn, assumes a dominance that completes it as a theme and gives the whole book structure and thrust.

In "Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening", Stephen Batchelor explained the Buddha's Dharma so simply, so persuasively, in such an approachable idiom, that it evoked my recognition that I was, in fact, a Buddhist, and no longer simply someone "interested in Buddhism" or "studying Buddhism". Now, in this book, the explanation is very much deeper, very much more tied to the phenomena we experience in the course of our noisy and surprising lives, but still clear, still free of jargon, even more persuasive. As the first book invited me to adopt it, this book invites me to reject the label "Buddhist", even as I realize that there is nothing to do, as each new surprise arrives and death comes every minute closer, but follow the Dharma that the Buddha elaborated with lively detail and remarkable subtlety in the teachings we find in the Pali Canon. In elaborating the theme within which his understanding of the Dharma is clarified, Batchelor explains his method for creating that understanding, which involves examining the canonical texts for elements which were part of Siddhattha Gotama's cultural environment, and those other elements, standing out from the rest of the texts, that could have been inserted later to justify the various orthodoxies that formed after the Buddha's death. Then, without necessarily rejecting those elements, we set them aside; what is left must be considered new and original, even radical. That is the

Buddhadharma. Batchelor's method leads directly to the third major theme of the book, the author's story of the Buddha's life as an individual human being. Without understanding that, one cannot separate the extraordinary experience that the Buddha awakened to after deep examination from the experience that all other human beings of his time saw as ordinary, needing no examination. Recreating the Buddha's life is no simple task; much of what's been handed down is clearly myth, and the community of monks who remembered the Buddha's teachings with such deliberate effort, in such remarkable detail, and with such probable fidelity, were simply not interested either in the parts of the story that presented fairly the views of those with whom the Buddha held debate, or in any narration of events that we today would identify as "historical". So Batchelor is left to tease a plausible story from brief segments found here and there in the texts, from what we know about the

men and women with whom the Buddha associated and whose way of life he shared, and from uncommonly well-informed guessing. The figure that Batchelor sculpts of the man Siddhattha Gotama looks real to me; that figure could very well be the man who delivered the teachings that have come to inform my life. It is certainly truer to that man than the fat happy Buddhas in Chinatown gift shops or the austere Hellenic statues in museum galleries. Beyond that, who can know? And that brings us to the essential message of "Confession of a Buddhist Atheist": the impossibility of knowing, and the freedom we gain from that impossibility--the freedom to trust our experience and follow that to an understanding of the Dharma that works on our lives, the freedom to create those lives, the freedom to cultivate a path that allows me to awake tomorrow morning (barring the inevitable surprises) a better person than the person who woke this morning. This is an important book. Batchelor's writing style is the very model of "right speech", articulating the most subtle and difficult notions with wit and clarity. For those who think they know Buddhism, the book will illuminate that knowledge. For those who are coming fresh to the study of the Buddha and his teachings, this is a wonderful introduction, requiring no pre-requisite study, demanding nothing of the reader but diligent attention.

I actually finished this book a week ago, and at the time was unsure how I was going to rate it. Batchelor's conclusions re: Buddhism are very different from my own. I enjoy the magic, the mystic, expressions present in some lineages of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, and with connecting with Buddha as an eternal force, not only a human being. So I was faintly dissatisfied with where the author's own journey and research led him, and almost docked a star because of it. In the end, though, I didn't, because the book is so well-written and well-researched, and I have found myself thinking about it and discussing it frequently with people I know. I read and review a lot of books, many of them Buddhist, and few of them stay with me for this long. So that to me is a sign of a five-star book, whether I personally agree and relate to all the author's points or not. My favorite parts of the book were his stories regarding his own experiences as a young Tibetan Buddhist monk, and then studying in Korea with a Zen teacher, while grappling with existential questions and increasingly exploring Western philosophy as well. What a profound seeker! As I said, my own personal experiences have led me to a more mystic orientation, and I kept feeling like the author's intellect was getting in his way. But that is not for me to say. In the end, I admired his integrity and dedication to seeking truth. It is rare that someone is willing to throw away everything they have known, all that has made them comfortable, over and over again as their searching brings them to new conclusions. And that is what Mr. Batchelor did - first by becoming a Tibetan Buddhist monk,

then by leaving his Lama teacher to study with a Zen monk, and then by leaving his monastic vows behind entirely, marrying, and continuing to practice as a layperson. As a married person with a family myself, I also appreciated his analysis of the social forces that made celibacy a necessary choice for serious seekers in ages past, and his conclusions that in today's world, a lay life may actually be the ideal way to practice what the Buddha really taught. And his analysis of the latter - what the Buddha taught - is fascinating. He is focused on Buddha as a real person with real struggles, and within the social and cultural context of his time. Whether or not this is the 'true Buddha', I have no idea. The suttas are like the Bible in that way, as far as I am concerned - anyone can find something to support their view. What can't be disputed though, is the thoroughness and intensity of Batchelor's research and presentation. I think all Buddhists should read this book to put their own beliefs to the test. And I think anyone interested in Buddhism, but wary of 'religion', should read it as their number one guide. So five stars it is!

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