

What is this?

A secular dharma study course using talks given by Stephen Batchelor

• PART 5 OF 8 •

QUESTION AND RESPONSE

Recorded at the April 2016 Son Buddhist Retreat in Gaia House, Devon

1. Batchelor begins by attempting to convey in words the otherwise ineffable experience of mind in formal meditation, synonymous with ‘what some philosophers call the “facticity of experience”.’ If you too, do not find words adequate to describe the nature of mind through meditation, why do you think this is so for you? If you do have adequate descriptors, cite two or three that are useful to you.
2. Cite a dictionary definition of *rigpa*. Is this definition concordant with Batchelor’s identification of ‘some sort of primordial, pristine awareness that is even deeper than your mind?’
3. Over the course of receiving the instruction from Tulku Urygen Rinpoche that is ‘pointing out the nature of mind’ Batchelor ‘could not get round the problem that, no matter how much he tried to point this out to me, what I actually was aware of, was a physical sensation in the body’. What does Batchelor seem to conclude (as opposed to definitively conclude) from this encounter with Tulku Urygen Rinpoche?
4. What does this method of pointing out *rigpa* share with the instructions of other traditions on cultivating awareness of mind states, i.e. *citta* as taught in the Satipatthana sutta and in identifying *shin*, i.e. heart-mind or *citta*, as taught in the Korean Son (Zen) tradition of Kusan Sunim?

5. Do you share Batchelor's view that the three streams of dharma he references (the early dharma of the Satipatthana sutta, Korean Son and Tibetan Nyingma) assert and so reify a transcendent awareness, i.e. an awareness that is outside the sixfold consciousness (eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, tactile-consciousness, mind-consciousness)? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. Just for fun, take the view that there is a breakthrough or a penetration into a state of being that 'is something else', the characteristics of which definitively differ from one's state prior to this breakthrough or penetration. Given such, for one who would point this out to another, how could s/he communicate this experience without being subject to the critique that s/he is reifying what is, in fact, without basis?
7. Consider these verses from the *Sabbe Sutta*, translated by Batchelor:

Monks, I will teach you everything. What is everything? The eye and sights; the ear and sounds; the nose and smells; the tongue and tastes; the body and sensations; the mind and ideas. That is everything. But if someone should come along and say 'No, there is more than that. There is a much greater everything', such a person would be making an empty boast. Why? Because that person is speaking about something that is not within his sensorium or his domain.

How do these verses support Batchelor's critique of traditions that, in his opinion, assert an awareness that is outside the six-fold consciousness?

8. Contemplating the question 'what is this?', Batchelor comments that '“this” is what you are experiencing right now' as opposed to 'what our teacher [Kusan Sunim] told us, that “this” refers to this sort of mystical citta or shin or mind'. What does Batchelor offer here to support his view, in contradiction to that of Kusan Sunim, that “this” is what you are experiencing right now'?
9. Do you find a resonance with Batchelor's view that what moves one to practice the dharma is coming to terms with the question 'that we are', to 'pursue the question of what we are'? If not this, then what moves you to

practice the dharma?

10. Give an example, if you have one, of your having experienced a clear sensation of doubt that was, or is, a source of insight for you.
11. Batchelor summarises the practice of koan as ‘turning the student’s attention away from those kinds of [abstract] questions altogether and returning attention to what is right before your eyes’. If you have experience with koan practice, do you think this summation is accurate? If so, why? If not, why not?
12. Consider the view that as opposed to the pursuit of philosophical, metaphysical, psychological abstractions, ‘what is at hand is arguably what is truly mysterious’. What is it about philosophical, metaphysical, psychological abstraction that is so engaging and mysterious as compared to everyday experience that is so banal or obvious?
13. Batchelor advises that if one quiets the mental chatter, attends to what is seen, heard and sensed, one is ‘attending to this mundane world in a different way’ and so is practicing mindfulness. How does such mindfulness counter the sense of lack, inferiority or inadequacy that shadows idealistic views?
14. A text referenced by Kusan Sunim reads as follows:

If there’s great perplexity there will be great awakening; if there’s little perplexity, there will be little awakening; if there is no perplexity, there will be no awakening.

If one can practice with a constancy of desire to resolve this existential doubt/uncertainty/perplexity, what follows?
15. Batchelor characterises some of the artistry of Chan, Zen and Son as articulating the artist’s ‘having come into a new relationship with the ordinary objects of our daily life’. If you have a piece or representation of a piece in which you see such, bring it with you to show during our discussion.

SOURCE MATERIAL

The four

Suffering (*dukkha*)

Arising (*samudaya*) (craving or *taṇhā*)

Ceasing (*nirodha*)

Path (*maggā*)

The four tasks

Suffering is to be **fully known** (*pariññā*)

Arising is to be **let go of** (*pahāna*)

Ceasing is to be **experienced** (*sacchikāta*)

Path is to be **cultivated** (*bhāvanā*)

The twelve aspects of the four

Each of the four tasks is to be

(i) **recognised**, (ii) **performed**, (iii) **accomplished**

i.e. (i) such is suffering, (ii) it is to be fully known, (iii) it has been fully known

ELSA

Embrace, Let go, Stop, Act

As long as my knowledge and vision was not entirely clear about the twelve aspects of the four, I did not claim to have had a peerless awakening in this world...

– the Buddha, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*

Whatever is an arising thing, that too is a ceasing thing.

– Kondañña, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*

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