

What is this?

A secular dharma study course using talks given by Stephen Batchelor

• PART 6 OF 8 •

INSTRUCTION – WHAT IS THIS?

AND

GOOD SNOWFLAKES: THEY DON'T FALL ANYWHERE ELSE

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

Instruction – what is this?

1. What does 'the totality that is present within us at this moment' include? What, if anything, does it exclude?
2. In the account of Huijong's training with the 8th century Ch'an master Huineng, after arriving from Mount Son, Huijong is questioned by Huineng: 'What is this thing and how did it get here?' What is being asked of Huijong?
3. How does Batchelor characterise the path and results of contemplation of a dialogue or a koan such as 'What is this?'?
4. In discussing the power of questioning to transform, Batchelor refers to Heidegger's statement that 'questioning is the piety of thinking'. How does Batchelor paraphrase Heidegger here?
5. If you wish, practice as instructed, incorporating periods into your regular meditation sessions. If you did so more than once prior to our discussion, what was your experience?

Good snowflakes: they don't fall anywhere else

1. Batchelor comments that in showing, as opposed to telling, these stories 'bring the calculating mind to a stop', leaving one with an image that may be revealing. In your reading of the case (p.3), what image remains with you? If the image is meaningful to you, what is the meaning?
2. Comparing the Buddha's teaching as passed down in the Pali canon with the later middle way reasoning of Nagarjuna, what is the power of the Ch'an tradition in conveying the Buddha's teaching of *pratīyasamutpāda*?
3. What is pointed to in the analogy between the macro scale of space-time-universe and the micro scale of the neurological structure of the brain?
4. What were your feelings as you contemplated, along with Batchelor, the arbitrary, utterly contingent, accidental appearance of homo sapiens on the earth, our earth being one of innumerable rocks 'crashing around in space'?
5. If you have difficulty accepting the science here, why do you think that is so? If you have no difficulty accepting the science here, what is your sense of place/sense of connection, if any?
6. What were your feelings as you contemplated, along with Batchelor, the arbitrary, utterly contingent, accidental appearance of yourself?
7. Does either the image of good snowflakes or contemplation of the question 'What is this?' evoke for you the profundity of *pratīyasamutpāda*? If so, describe what is seen – clearly seen or not, no matter.
8. Cite verses of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats or Burke that for you illustrate the poet's sense of the sublime, i.e. that 'which exceeds the capacity for representation', and/or is 'simultaneously terrifying and fascinating'.
9. Negative capability is defined by Keats as being 'when a man is capable of resting in mysteries, uncertainties and doubts without any irritable

reaching after fact or reason'. Give an account from your own life, in which your capacity for negative capability was evident.

from the Blue Cliff Record: Layman P'ang's Good Snowflakes

translator Thomas Cleary

When Layman P'ang took leave of Yao Shan, Shan ordered ten Chan travellers to escort him to the gate. The Layman pointed to the snow in the air and said, 'Good snowflakes they don't fall in any other place.'

At the time one of the Chan travellers named Ch'uan said, 'Where do they fall?' The Layman slapped him once. Ch'uan said, 'Even a layman shouldn't be so coarse.' The Layman said, 'Though you call yourself a Chan traveller this way, the King of Death still won't let you go.' Ch'uan said, 'How about you, Layman?' Again the Layman slapped him and said, 'Your eyes see like a blind man, your mouth speaks like a mute.' Hsueh Tau said besides, 'When P'ang first spoke I just would have made a snowball and hit him with it.'