



Revamp

writings on secular Buddhism

A GUIDE FOR
READING GROUP
AND INDIVIDUAL STUDY

TUWHIRI

Wellington

Aotearoa New Zealand



Part I

Emergence



Chapter 1

The coming of secular Buddhism: a synoptic view

In this chapter Winton says he is focusing mainly on the post-Theravadin experience, setting the scene in the opening paragraphs. He leaves it to the reader to qualify his remarks for the legatees of other branches of ancestral Buddhism. If you've previously practised in one of the other traditional forms of Buddhism, how do you experience exposure to the secular perspective?

What is Buddhist modernism? In what sense is there a historical compromise at the heart of Buddhist modernism?

How did early Buddhist modernism attract the sobriquet 'Protestant Buddhism'?

What's been your experience of monastics and monasticism? Do you recognise the perspective presented in this chapter? To what extent do you sympathise with it?

Where do you stand in the controversy over the psychologisation of Buddhism?

In what sense is secularity an achievement of many centuries of religious evolution? As you understand this, what are the various meanings of the term 'secular'? How have those meanings broadened (or not) throughout your life, and what prompted this development?

Have you experienced Taylor's 'nova effect' in your own spiritual exploration? Perhaps refer back to the quote at the start of this chapter as a prompt.

Can full human flourishing be pursued within the human condition – entirely within 'the immanent frame' – or must it ultimately seek to transcend it?

What are the moral risks stalking the secular option? How might we guard against succumbing to these? Likewise with hubris (i.e. what form would hubris take and how might it be avoided?).

N.B.

Notes are found in the book at the end of each section on the following pages:

Introduction	p.xviii
Chapters 1 to 3	p.58
Chapters 4 to 7	p.95
Chapters 8 to 12	p.129
Chapters 13 & 14	p.148
Conclusion	p.205



Chapter 2

The flexible appropriation of tradition

Given the extent of Stephen Batchelor's contributions to the development of secular Buddhism, it seems likely that the reader has some experience with his work. Are there aspects of his work that you feel uncomfortable with?

What has your own interaction and experience been, if any, with the three books reviewed in this chapter? If you've read some or all of them, do you think that they are fairly summarised in this chapter?

What's your perspective on the use of the word 'atheist' in the title of *Confession of a Buddhist atheist*?

To what extent does the operating-system analogy (Buddhism 1.0, Buddhism 2.0) work for you?

Winton identifies key elements of Stephen Batchelor's approach to Buddhism, including the four tasks (or fourfold task), a rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, and the everyday sublime. Which of these concepts have the most relevance to your practice?



Chapter 3

Secular Buddhism: scientific versus interpretive

Do you recognise the two divergent tendencies described in the opening of this chapter? To what extent do your own experiences align with the geographical split suggested here?

Winton uses ‘the God problem’ to illustrate the difference in approach between the ‘analytic’ wing of western philosophy and the ‘Continental’ one. Explore another example in order to better understand the difference in approach.

How does the tension between these two approaches manifest in your own life? Your strength of feeling about this may depend on the sense of how philosophy enters into how you process your everyday life.

You may have been on a journey through ‘the God problem’ yourself. If so, have you also arrived at the same conclusion as Winton: that secular Buddhists should avoid debates that lead nowhere and don’t concern us?

Winton frames the ‘science versus (Christian) religion’ standoff as a competition in the revelation market. In your own view, is this a useful perspective to help make sense of your own involvement (or not) in this disagreement?

To what extent do you agree with Stephen Poole’s comment that we have outsourced the job of interpreting ourselves to the modern life sciences?

What do you make of the notion that we ought to take responsibility for interpreting ourselves? What is to be gained from ‘interpreting ourselves afresh every day, and without presuppositions’? What are the potential downsides to taking that path?



Part II

Western affinities



Chapter 4

Heidegger, not-self and being-there

Before reading this chapter, what did you know of Heidegger and his philosophy? How did this chapter add to or alter what you already knew?

Give an example of where a worldview assumes humans to be independent entities interacting with other independent entities. In what respect might this example show that the worldview in question is misleading?

How do you react when presented with the idea that you don't exist as an autonomous entity? However much affinity you may have for the idea, do you still reject it at some level?

If the cobbler example doesn't mean much to you, what other kind of artisan would be more helpful to illustrate *being*? Would the example of a primary carer of a newborn baby work as well for you, or even better?

How does Heidegger's idea of living authentically match up with your pre-existing idea of authenticity? Does your idea of authenticity relate to being-towards-death? To what extent does teenage rebellion or countercultural living align with Heidegger's second criterion for authentic living?

Are you drawn to metaphysical speculation about whether the self 'exists' or not? In this context, why does Winton refer to it as 'unhelpful'?

Have you ever found a solid entity-like self in your experience when you paid close attention to it? The two-sided *anatta* coin here says you won't, but how does that compare with your actual experience, and the experience of others whom you consider reliable?

When do you take time to consider what you really do care about, i.e., what drives your choices and directs your energies? How do you go about this inquiry? Have you found meditation to be a useful way to understand your priorities?



Chapter 5

Martin Hägglund, secular faith and spiritual freedom

Before reading this chapter, what did you already know about Hägglund and his work? If you'd not heard of him before, what would you initially assume the phrase *secular faith* to mean?

Are you aware of any conventional religions that don't propagate the kind of 'religious faith' that Hägglund rejects?

Have you ever embarked on a path of renunciation? If so, what was your motivation and how did it play out? If not, is there someone you know well who has been down this path whom you could consider? Did it impoverish life, or ameliorate suffering?

How troubled are you by the possible transactional aspect of the intention to do good?

To what extent does your finitude inform your choices and experiences in life? This could be gross or subtle. Have you found a way to live with death on the horizon without being glib or trite? What would you want to be 'remembered for', if that is something that motivates you?

If you have experience of someone who suffers from dementia, how might this inform your understanding of the link between memories, present experience and having a sense of life's fullness? Even if you don't, how do your concerns about developing dementia later in life compare with your concerns about developing other life-changing illnesses?

If you've read the confessions of Augustine, or the novels of Proust or Knausgaard, how did engaging with their stories inform the investigation of your own experience, if at all?

What is the difference between Hägglund's 'spiritual freedom' and religious salvation?

Consider two of the 'practical identities' that you have chosen. What kinds of standards do you hold yourself to in these two areas? How does making the best sense of your life as a whole involve a trade-off of resources between these identities? To what extent have you come to terms with these kinds of compromises? And how has this changed through time (both in terms of the balance struck and the dissatisfaction associated with having to compromise)?

In what way is 'existential anxiety ... a sign of our spiritual freedom'?

What role has suffering-avoidance played in your own motivation to practise the dharma, and how has it changed over time?

How resistant are you to being told what to make of the insight gained through meditation practice?

If you haven't already, did reading this chapter encourage you to read (or consider reading) Hägglund's book? If so, why? If not, why not?

How are Hägglund's notions of secular faith and spiritual freedom consistent with secular Buddhists' approach to ethics, meditation, and wisdom?



Chapter 6

Freud, dukkha and flourishing

With regard to the Buddha's list of the elements of dukkha, have you discovered an annoyance that falls outside this list?

Why do you think that Winton says that dukkha stands for *inescapable* aspects of the human condition?

When was the last time you managed to avoid the major forms of reactivity and instead embraced a difficulty that life threw up? Can you recall an instance of seeing someone else do this, such that it inspired you? On the other hand, how much easier is it for you to recognise delusion in others compared to delusion in yourself?

Winton suggests that many of us ignore, neglect and trivialise mourning. Do you have any particularly salient examples, or counter-examples of this attitude?

Search out and read Delmore Schwartz's poem 'Calmly we walk through this April's day', whose final two lines Winton quotes. Does this sound like the young but already famous poet that accompanied Freud on his 1914 hike in the Dolomites?

What is so attractive about ducking the challenge of impermanence in our lives? How might we support each other in living through the hard bits in our human existence?

When a loved one has died, were you able to fully experience your grief or did you turn away from it?



Chapter 7

Peter Watson

Winton uses the example of the birth of one's own child as a momentous occasion ripe for intensified care-full attention. Is there another example that you could use here in a similar way?

In your own words, what makes the dharma a path of *care*?

In your experience, what have been the most compelling metaphysical distractions? These could be the typical false gods in western culture. To what extent have you been able to abandon them, as recommended?

Where have you had the most success in working in a goalless way? Did you experience the tribulations described in this chapter? How did you maintain interest in whatever it was? Did you learn anything that is of relevance to sustaining the urgency and intensity of your practice?

In your practice, how does 'automatic pilot' manifest? When do you find yourself in that mode of operating?

What are your sources of inspiration? Do you explicitly acknowledge them as a source of inspiration? To what extent is your practice community, whatever form it might take, a 'palpable manifestation of care'?



Part III

The inner life



Chapter 8

Renewing the practice from first principles

In your understanding, why does secularity indicate that we should *historically* approach the question of how we can adapt and use the three great trainings?

Refresh your knowledge of the five precepts, making sure to link them to the values of universal friendliness, generosity, contentment, honesty and mental clarity. In what way do they represent an ethic as opposed to a morality?

What have been the effects of the institutionalisation of dharma practice in the centuries after the Buddha's death? To what extent have these effects influenced you, your practice, and your practice community? For example, how susceptible have you been to the idea that spiritual progress comes down to compliance with a template?

What type of meditation do you do? Do you meditate with a purpose in mind? If so, what is your purpose?

Techniques that cull and trim our meditative experience abound. If you practise a non-formulaic approach to meditation, what do you value about it such that you're willing to leave aside meditative techniques that work to formulas? Is there still a place for a formulaic element in your practice? How do you manage your own practice intelligently?

What does it mean to you to *practise* wisdom? How does it relate to your practice of ethics and meditation?



Chapter 9

Secular insight practice and everyday awakening

Suggest what Winton might mean in the second paragraph of this chapter by a ‘consumerist approach’ to our spiritual choices.

Can a Theravādin monk in robes claim to be ‘not a Buddhist’ in your opinion? Whatever your answer, what would it take to change it? How might this relate to your own self-declared status as a Buddhist/not a Buddhist?

Regarding the various translations of *sati*, is there one you favour? What lies behind your preference? Or perhaps there’s one translation you prefer to avoid? Again, what lies behind this preference?

To what extent do you feel that you have choices in your meditation practice? Does your answer depend on how autonomous you feel as a practitioner?

Where do you want your spiritual life to go? Can you frame your answer in terms of self-purification versus self-enlargement?

As Richard Rorty accounts for the contrast, Winton disavows the self-purification approach and recommends the self-enlargement approach. Summarise his arguments in favour of his stance. How convinced are you by these arguments? Did you feel differently about this in the past? If so, what has changed?

In what sense does the *Satipatthāna sutta* provide us with a ‘conceptual map of a whole inner topography’? How much of that map have you explored?



Chapter 10

From goal-orientation to honouring process

Winton suggests that by dropping goal-orientation in favour of a focus on *process*, the practice and its transformative effects on us are their own reward. Is this something you've experienced in your own practice? Have the rewards been commensurate with your level of engagement?

If we don't have to abandon terms like 'realisation' and 'awakening', what might be the benefit of retaining them?

What are the three levels of practice according to Winton? In your own practice, at which level are you mostly engaged at this point?



Chapter 11

Forms of resistance to the inner life

Of the pathways into the inner life listed in the fourth paragraph of this chapter, which ones do you find useful? Rank them, if that helps. Are there any in the list that you haven't tried, but would like to?

Do you ever find yourself aspiring to busyness? Revealing instances may be catching yourself about to tell someone how busy you are, or feeling that you ought to make plans as your diary has a gap in it? How do you feel when you see others treating busyness as a virtue in itself?

In what kind of circumstances do you experience resistance to the inner life based on its superficial unattractiveness (as illustrated by the Strawson quote)? Are you able to see this for what it is when it happens?

What are your strategies, if any, to keep new technologies as a good servant rather than a bad master?

Do you have an example from your own experience of how your relationship with a 'modern age' hindrance has ended up teaching you something regarding the pursuit of a meditative life?



Chapter 12

Ask not whether it's true – ask rather whether it works

Construct a contemporary analogue of the power freak's utterance from the first paragraph of this chapter: one that does have power for us now, unlike the historical 'almighty god' example. What gives your chosen utterance its power?

Refresh your knowledge about 'the four sights' in Buddhism. How does this traditional story about the young Gotama's life encapsulate the fundamental existential issues that he and his well-off associates worried about?

In what sense might the Buddha belong among the post-metaphysical thinkers? Given his historical context, to what extent do you think it would have been possible for him to think of himself in that way?

What are your most well-worn sidetracks into metaphysical claims and arguments? What makes them so sticky for you? Have you found any useful ways of avoiding getting sidetracked in this way?

How do you receive the suggestion that secularists might respect religion, even practise it in some sense? If it quickly brings up strong resistance in you, can you identify what the major sticking point is?

Winton asks and answers the questions: 'What is Buddhist mindfulness-based meditation for, and what modus operandi does it propose to serve its purpose?' What answers would you provide to those two questions? Don't spend a long time preparing an answer – consider what you'd say if you were giving a quick response.

Summarise the approach to meditation that is 'appropriate to the way of life of institutionalised male renunciants'. What makes it inappropriate to your own way of life?

What do you make of the idea of 'nurturing' our own meditation practice? To what extent is this kind of metaphor helpful in this context?

How do you reflect on your meditative effectiveness? What do you do to probe the subtle, off-the-cushion indications described in the paragraph before the conclusion of this chapter?

How interested are you in the question of whether this 'really is Buddhism'? Would you be willing to get on Batchelor's raft?



Part IV

Practising with others



Chapter 13

Sangha – the western dharma practitioner’s dilemma

Does the individualistic approach described in the opening paragraphs of this chapter ring true? Is this something you’ve wrestled with? If not, have you seen someone close to you fall into this pattern? What was the outcome (or where is it headed if it is still in process)?

To what extent do you see community as a process rather than a mere collection of individuals? How has your experience shaped this view?

In your experience, how much better is audio-visual digital communication than single-channel mediated communication? If you’ve had to rely on it for community because other options were closed off, what were the key benefits and drawbacks? Did you make the transition back to unmediated communication?

Do you have any helpful experience to share of practising with a conventional Asian-fusion dharma group? How did it compare to the generalised picture presented by Winton in this chapter?

What is the dilemma mentioned in the title of this chapter? And what is being suggested as the way to resolve this dilemma?

Do you agree that it’s important to create inclusive egalitarian sanghas? What does this mean to you?

Do you have any helpful experience to share of practising with a free and self-governing dharma group? How did the community’s shared ethic drive it onwards, without recourse to hierarchical authority? Was the quality of humour present (mentioned in the final paragraph of this chapter?)



Chapter 14

Dharmic existentialist ethics in a time of pandemic

If you've read Albert Camus's novel *The plague*, to what extent were you aware of the circumstances in Camus' life that influenced the novel?

What are the dharmic resonances in *The plague* that are considered in this chapter? If you've read the novel, did you recognise them in this way?

What is happening in the world right now that demands your resistance? Hindsight makes it easy for us to see that the Chambonnais were doing the right thing, but how can you have such confidence when you're caught up in unfolding events?

Can you think of another situation where the only way to fight the problem is with decency? What might this look like, using parallels with the plague situation described in this chapter. What role might authenticity play here?

If you are familiar with any of Camus's other novels, how do decency, suffering and evil feature in those works? Are there further dharmic resonances that have significance for you?

If you haven't already, did reading this chapter encourage you to read (or consider reading) *The plague*? Why? If not, why not?



Part V

Dharmic citizenship



Chapter 15

Defending our common home

Explain how Francis exemplifies both religious and secular faith (discussed earlier in chapter 5).

Can you make use of the profound questions floated towards the end of the chapter: What do I value above all? To what or whom do I owe my most fundamental loyalty? What do we want to be remembered for? How would those closest to us recall our character and deeds? Why would reflecting on your possible answers to these questions come before questions like ‘What must I give up?’?

Do you agree with Pope Francis that the crisis of climate change is intimately connected to ‘dire and intensifying social injustices and exclusions’?

What is the relevance of Pope Francis’ analysis of the causes of the climate change crisis for secular dharma practitioners?

Have you participated in social and political movements to respond to climate change and social injustice? If so, how has your engagement been affected by your practice, and your appreciation of a secular dharma?



Chapter 16

Transition

This chapter is titled 'transition': as you understand it, what are the initial and final states in this transition? Is this even the best way to interpret what is being outlined here?

Do you agree with Winton that neoliberal capitalism is a basic cause of the two major crises we face today, and needs to be transformed? If you don't agree, what do you think are the main causes of our social problems?

Do you accept, along with Martin Hägglund and Winton, that we need to create a democratic socialist society in order to facilitate full human flourishing, including our capacity for spiritual freedom?

If you're sceptical of (or opposed to) gradually moving towards a democratic socialist society, what kind of society do you think we should aim to achieve?

What is your role in creating what Stephen Batchelor calls a 'community of awakening'?

TUWHIRI

FINDING MEANING IN A DIFFICULT WORLD

In 2018 a small group of people in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia came together to produce and publish a book. Looking for a name for our imprint that would express what we stood for as secular Buddhist practitioners, we adopted a word in *te reo Māori*: Tuwhiri. It was our way of acknowledging and respecting the *tangata whenua*, the indigenous people of Aotearoa.

This project was discussed within and beyond the small communities of secular Buddhists in our two countries. ‘Tuwhiri’ captures our response to our encounter with the forms of Buddhism that had arrived here. The notion of revealing, making known, discovering something lost or hidden, matched our experience of finding fresh insights in the early Buddhist teachings when we examined them anew.

Secular Buddhism is a trend in contemporary western Buddhism which highlights care – the fundamental ethic in the teachings of the historical Buddha – in all its aspects. Secularity calls on us to express this ethic of care in ways appropriate to our time and current predicaments.

In the face of humanity-induced catastrophes – not least today’s climate emergency and intensifying social injustices – we owe a special duty of care to future generations to overcome them, and to leave our successors with a safer, fairer world in which they may thrive. We need to express our care for coming generations in many ways, from changing our own personal lifestyles, through accounting for our history, to choosing political representatives who advance long-sighted policies in aid of a better world.

MORE THAN JUST BOOKS

As well as publishing books on early Buddhism, its retrieval, and secular adaptation to twenty-first century conditions, we have published thought-provoking books which may not obviously be dharma books but which serve the ethic of care that is central to the dharma. During the COVID lockdown, we produced the newsletter

'Creative Dharma'. Tuwhiri was also instrumental in creating the online secular Buddhism course that is now available through the Secular Buddhist Network.

We are immensely grateful for the time, energy and expertise so generously given to this project by individuals, communities and organisations around the world.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Tell your friends about Tuwhiri

Buy them a coffee, send them a text, call them, tweet, post on Facebook – however you do it, please let us know what you've done. Connect with us on **Twitter** (@tuwhiri) and **Facebook**, and send friends to our **YouTube channel**.

Run a course for your sangha

Bring together a group of people to go through *Revamp: writings on secular Buddhism* together with this workbook. Buy a gift card for **NZD \$200 or more** in our online store, and we'll send you 10 printed copies of *Revamp* – and also the digital versions as well).

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT

If you value what Tuwhiri is doing, your support will mean we can publish more books and develop more online courses for people with an interest in a creative secular approach to the dharma.

Whatever country you live in, you can support Tuwhiri using your debit card or credit card with a donation to Aotearoa Buddhist Education Trust. On **www.paypal.com** click **Send** and send your donation to **generosity@tuwhiri.nz**.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, you can make a charitable donation into our **Kiwibank account at 38-9019-0064662-07**. To get a NZ tax receipt email admin@tuwhiri.nz letting us know how much you donated, and the date.

If you have any questions at all write to ask@tuwhiri.nz.

Revised 17 May 2024

OUR HEARTFELT THANKS GO TO

Winton Higgins for writing this Tuwhiri book and to **Jim Champion, Mike Slott** and **Suzanne Franzway** for the questions they devised. As a result of their efforts, we can offer you this reading group study guide to accompany *Revamp, writings on secular Buddhism*. We hope you can put it to good use.