

The practice of negative capability – Buddhist reflections on creative uncertainty

By Stephen Batchelor

'Negative capability – that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason' – John Keats



I was born into a world no longer rooted in the certainties of religious belief. As a young man I fled the anxieties of this condition and embraced with fervour the certainties of a faith (Tibetan Buddhism) as far removed from my cultural origins as one could imagine. Despite the assurances of my mentors, this quest for certainty in orthodox Buddhism failed.

Once again I found myself confronted by uncertainty. This uncertainty I now encountered, however, presented itself not as a source of despair but of creative possibility. At this point I turned away from the dogmatism of Tibetan Buddhism and began to train in Zen: a tradition that values questions over answers, perplexity over belief.

The *locus classicus* of creative uncertainty in Buddhist tradition is perhaps found in the Buddha's own response to his enlightenment. After a six year period of spiritual struggle, Gotama sat beneath a tree and underwent an awakening (*bodhi*). He then spent six weeks in a state of silent, solitary hesitation. It took the sudden appearance of a god (Brahma) to prompt him into action. Only then did he set out to articulate to others what he had experienced. In so doing he 'set in motion the wheel of dharma'.

Buddhist theology subsequently developed a model of awakening that rejected the idea of its being intelligible solely as a private, mystical and ineffable experience. Instead, awakening was understood as a threefold presencing (*tdkaya*), which originates from the ground of emptiness (*sunyata*) and then unfolds through ideas and images into concrete

acts in historical and social settings. Awakening, therefore, is not a state of mind but a process of creative incarnation.

While originating in an entirely different context, Keats' concept of negative capability bears a striking affinity with the practice of Zen Buddhism. It also sheds light on the role of uncertainty in the creative process.

For Keats the exemplary artist was Shakespeare, whom he describes as 'the least of an egoist that it was possible to be; he was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were or could become'. One might equally use this phrase to describe the Buddha dwelling in selfless freedom (*nirvana*) beneath the bodhi tree after his awakening.

By thinking of spiritual/religious life as akin to the creative process of the artist, one can consider uncertainty and selflessness as the ground from which value and meaning are created in the world. One's relation to a tradition is no longer that of achieving conformity to the beliefs and dogmas of an orthodoxy. Instead the tradition – in my case Buddhism – comes to serve as the raw material for one's art.

– Programme notes for a contribution to the 2002 Sea of Faith conference in Timaru, New Zealand on 'Creative uncertainty'