



**After
Buddhism**
a workbook

Winton Higgins
with Jim Champion and Ramsey Margolis

TUWHIRI

Wellington

Aotearoa New Zealand

 | Foreword

After Buddhism: rethinking the dharma for a secular age is the culmination of more than forty years' study and practice of the Buddha's teaching. The book weaves together various ideas and themes that have engaged me as a practitioner and writer throughout this time. This process has been an ongoing struggle to articulate the dharma in a contemporary language stripped of the metaphysical and cosmological views of ancient India. It has likewise been a continuous attempt to divest the dharma of the trappings of dogma and priestly authority that continue to characterise the Buddhist religion. In hindsight, I see this work as part of a wider movement towards an unashamedly secular vision of what the Buddha taught.

I am most grateful to Winton Higgins for developing and teaching his study course on *After Buddhism*, which has now resulted in this workbook. I hope that this volume will not only deepen your understanding of what *After Buddhism* is about, but also encourage you to examine the text critically, thereby enabling you to become 'independent of others' in your own practice of being human. Many thanks also to Jim Champion for contributing the discussion questions and to The Tuwhiri Project for making this book available.

Stephen Batchelor

Aquitaine, April 2018

A vertical line starts from the top of the page and ends at the symbol. To the left of the line is a stylized symbol resembling a knot or a calligraphic character.

∞ Preface

You have decided to study Stephen Batchelor's *After Buddhism: re-thinking the dharma for a secular age*. Excellent! His book explores early Buddhism anew, and expresses its profound meaning and practice in terms relevant to the circumstances we encounter in the twenty-first century.

His main title signals a critique of *conventional versions* of 'Buddhism' that the west has received from long-established Asian institutions and teachers. These versions typically embody unappealing cultural sensibilities, assumptions and exclusions that mask the burning relevance of the tradition's early teachings for today's westerners in particular. In short, Stephen seeks to retrieve the early teachings and apply them to the lives we lead now. He's by no means suggesting that the dharma itself is superseded.

This workbook builds on a sixteen-session study course based on *After Buddhism* presented by Winton Higgins to two Sydney *sanghas* (practice communities – Bluegum and Golden Wattle respectively). It follows the same sixteen sessions as the study course, which in turn reflects the chapter-structure of Stephen's book. The course and this workbook divide some of the weightier chapters of *After Buddhism* into two sessions.

More than a few participants from both sanghas offered the suggestion that the course should be made more widely available.

Hence this workbook, which is intended to underpin both group and individual study. For maximum benefit, *After Buddhism* and the workbook can be read together. The discussion questions that conclude each session have been contributed by Jim Champion and are intended to stimulate both group discussion and individual reflection.

Readers will find a selected list of references at the back of this book. It lists books and other source that the main text explicitly or implicitly cites.

We are deeply grateful for Stephen Batchelor's encouragement, to everyone who backed us on Kickstarter, and to John Houston in London for designing the cover and the pages of this workbook.

If you have any questions about *After Buddhism* or about this workbook, write to ask@tuwhiri.nz.

Winton Higgins, Sydney

Jim Champion, Southampton

Ramsey Margolis, Wellington

April 2018



Session one:

What is *After Buddhism* all about?

Stephen faced the difficulty common to all book authors – what to call the damn thing. A book title has to convey an instant message, and situate that message in relation to all the other books current in its subject area. Following advice from his editor, he followed today’s conventional wisdom: give the book a grabby ‘generic’ title, followed by a subtitle that is more informative. Hence *After Buddhism: rethinking the dharma for a secular age*.

In choosing this title, he has followed (among others) Gianni Vattimo, the post-metaphysical philosopher who chose to remain a Catholic, though on an idiosyncratic basis, and called his book exploring this choice *After Christianity*. In both cases, what is being superseded is a conventional conception of a tradition which offers riches now buried beneath outmoded or inappropriate ways of expressing and practising it.

In this context, we should remember that the concept and term ‘Buddhism’ was an early-nineteenth century European invention. As far as I know it has no equivalent in any Asian language, and certainly not in the tradition’s classical languages – Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. So we can tease out Stephen’s main title to mean something like, ‘after we get beyond today’s conventional understanding of what Buddhism is, including the idea that it stands for just one monolithic tradition’. Taken as a whole, his title counter-

poses this 'Buddhism' with the living dharma tradition that Gotama (c. 480–400 BCE), 'the historical Buddha', founded in the Ganges Basin in northeastern India.

The project heralded by the subtitle, *rethinking the dharma for a secular age*, almost certainly contains an implicit reference to the development of secular Christianity over the past half-century. In his preface, Stephen mentions among his principal sources of inspiration the progressive Protestant theologians Paul Tillich and Don Cupitt, who were in much the same business of rethinking Christianity for our secular age.

The issues for both traditions converge. On this point you are invited to jump onto the web and go to the transcript of a public dialogue, organised in 2012 by London Insight Meditation, between Stephen Batchelor and Don Cupitt – one moderated by *Guardian* journalist Madeleine Bunting. It's available online at <http://secularbuddhism.org/2012/08/02/batchelor-cupitt/>.

Here Don Cupitt – after 50 years as an Anglican priest – talks about Jesus as a first-century CE humanistic, radical, and this-worldly teacher whose message was mystified and mythologised by 'the first clergymen', Peter, James and Paul, around 50 CE. It didn't take long! (As we'll see, it didn't take long in the case of the dharma either.) Thereafter ecclesiastical Christianity developed, with its social conservatism, and its other-worldly and supernatural preoccupations.

To rethink Christianity for a secular age means to start with what was actually on the table before the 'clergymen' turned up. This is not to reject anything useful the many generations of clergymen have developed over the centuries, but it does uncover the foundations of the living tradition, and thus honours that tradition in the best possible way – an intelligent, sceptical one.

The parallel with the dharma is striking. The Buddha too was a

grounded, radical, this-worldly existential teacher, but the ‘clergy-men’ (or professionals, with Kassapa in the lead) quickly arrived on the scene after his death and took the tradition off into other-worldly realms, metaphysical beliefs, elaborate institutions, and ritualism. Once again, the challenge for those wanting to practise the dharma as a living tradition is to attempt to go back to the source as the founder left it, and from there figure out how to apply it in our own secular age, noting useful contributions that others have made in the intervening time.

So Stephen’s book isn’t a secular Buddhist polemic, still less an attempt to establish a new orthodoxy. Rather, it’s a fresh investigation of what the big and untidy Pali canon actually contains. It’s a new extrapolation, one driven by the central question the dharma poses (to use the traditional Ch’an formulation): how are we to confront ‘this great matter of life and death’? How are we to viscerally understand our lives as vulnerable, mortal beings endowed with consciousness? How do we make these lives meaningful and dignified – fully human? How are we to maximally occupy the human estate?

Stephen expresses his own search more simply and personally: ‘As a practicing Buddhist, I look to the discourses not just to mine them for scholarly knowledge but to come to terms with my own birth and death’ (p.21).

In *After Buddhism*, he presents us, among other things, with a fresh approach to mining the canon. One aspect of his approach consists in highlighting those teachings that are uniquely the Buddha’s own, and not simply drawn from the culture of his time and place, such that any contemporary spiritual teacher might have uttered them. A second aspect of Stephen’s approach takes the form of following the stories of some of the canon’s more interesting characters. The

early dharma isn't solely populated with standardised saintly renunciants – there are busy lay people like us in it too, and some of them were relatives and close friends of the Buddha.

These people faced major exigencies in their daily lives and their inner psychological tangles, but nevertheless gained the Buddha's accolade of 'seers of the deathless'. That is, at least some of the time, they dwelled in a sensibility permeated by the insight into conditionality ('dependent arising') and the experience of not-self. Their interactions with him and his feedback to them are extraordinarily poignant. They tell us much about how the dharma suffuses an ordinary human life to make it extraordinary.

And so we meet Mahānāma (the Buddha's cousin who, under difficult circumstances, became the chief of the small Sakiyan republic – a position formerly held by the Buddha's father, Suddhodana); Pasenadi (the king of Kosala); and Jīvaka (the physician at the Magadhan court). Such people performed vital communal functions, and the way the Buddha counselled them reflects his own conception of a healthy community and a good society.

Here we can get a sense of the dharma practitioner's civic role. All this sets up a contrast to conventional Buddhism's preoccupation with the serene monastic who spurns political and other worldly engagements in pursuit of individual salvation. In a similar vein, Stephen homes in on *the experience of conversion* to the dharma and the never-ending challenge of cultivating a way of life that nurtures its values. In one case of a monk we meet here, Sunakkhatta, the transition turns out to be too great, and he jumps ship.

Does a secular approach to dharma practice militate against religion? he asks. Not if you accept Paul Tillich's idea of what religion is basically about – pursuing some 'ultimate concern', such as the existential questions above.

As noted above, Stephen's ultimate concern encompasses the existential questions that arise as he comes to terms with his own birth and death. In his account, the Buddha offers four central, unique ideas to guide this project: his 'four Ps':

- ∅ The *principle* of conditionality
- ∅ The *practice* of a fourfold task
- ∅ The *perspective* of mindful awareness
- ∅ The *power* of self-reliance' (p.27)

Right. Let's get started.

Questions for study

1. How would you respond to someone who asks with genuine curiosity: 'Are you a Buddhist?'
2. How do you feel about Stephen's approach to the Pali canon: gleaning those of the Buddha's pronouncements that were uniquely his own, as opposed to ones that any teacher at the time might have uttered?
3. Where have you looked in order to come to terms with your own birth and death?
4. Have you ever had to rethink something from the ground up? How did it go?
5. How useful (or indeed possible) is it to try to go back to the start of something that has such a long history, such as Buddhism?
6. Do the introductory remarks about a secular approach to religion resonate with you? If so why? And if not, why not?



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