



The Lessons of History

by **Stephen Batchelor**
CPB Advisory Board Member

Study Guide by:

Shi Yong Xiang

Abbot, *Order of Pragmatic Buddhists*
Director of Buddhist Studies, *Center for Pragmatic Buddhism*

Page 1, Paragraph 2: Stephen Batchelor notes how even in the 1960s resources on Buddhism were scant. While this may sound like a relatively long time ago, in the academic world, it is but the beginning of scholarly investigation. It takes many decades to answer very basic questions to reasonable degrees of certainty as it is a long road from archeological discovery and the retrieval of historical materials, to developing the essential dialogue between traditional and contemporary accounts (stories, interpretations), and academia's maturation of the field through its ability to bridge history of the field and its particular pragmatic value today.

Page 1, Paragraph 3: Here Batchelor points out that it is the "endorsement and patronage" of King Ashoka that allowed Buddhism to rise into public view. Prior to this support from a powerful social figure (in this case political) Buddhism was a small, relatively unknown movement. This is also the case for Tibetan Buddhism and the 14th Dalai Lama's enthusiasm for Western science, which helped to popularize an otherwise unknown school of Buddhism.

Page 1-2, Paragraph 4: Batchelor makes note of the development of Buddhism in China: "*Initially, itinerant Buddhist monks were treated as [D]aoist sages from abroad: detached renunciants in the mode of Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu, dedicated to simplicity, contemplative discipline and wisdom. Over time, as more and more scriptures were translated into Chinese, as temples and monastic orders were established by powerful benefactors, Buddhism came to define itself as a distinctive movement with specific goals and ambitions. During the golden age of the Tang (618-907 CE), it came close to becoming the state religion, until an Imperial edict in 845 introduced a range of anti-Buddhist measures as an indigenous backlash against the increasing power being wielded by the 'foreign' religion. Although Buddhism survived as a force in Chinese culture, even on occasion becoming actively involved in nationalist political movements, it was never again to achieve the dominance it had achieved under the Tang.*" This narrative of Chinese Buddhism's history outlines the emergence of a *distinctly Chinese*

version of Buddhism, which was ultimately suppressed by political factions within China for its branding as a "foreign" worldview. Fortunately (and as Batchelor points out in this article) the West, due to its secular orientation, has not offered this kind of resistance to Buddhism thus far, and in fact Western science has found much affinity for Buddhism's naturalistic orientation.

Page 2, Paragraph 3: Batchelor states that "*Buddhism has demonstrated a remarkable capacity over the past two thousand years to cross cultural frontiers and then adapt itself to the needs of new situations.*" Additionally, "*In the course of its travels, Buddhism has likewise succeeded in generating an extraordinary diversity of forms.*" Thus, we see the message you often hear me say, which is that Buddhism *must* become relevant to the people and culture where it finds itself, as it is not sufficient to attempt a transplantation of foreign Buddhism in a very different time and place IF it is to take root in a sociopolitical way, to become an *effective agent of social critiquing*. Also, Batchelor points out and personally praises the "diversity" of Buddhism, which allows it to remain malleable to new and changing needs. This is the perspective we take of our work in OPB and CPB.

Page 2, Paragraph 4: This is a very important paragraph warranting full citation, as Batchelor endorses the view of Pragmatic Buddhism we take in OPB: "*As Buddhist teachings and practices are adopted in the modern secular democracies of America and Europe, we find ourselves witnessing a process that has already occurred many times over the past centuries in Asia. Once again, Buddhism is crossing a cultural frontier from one place where it is an established religion to another place where it is largely unknown. Yet while the broad outlines of this cross-cultural process may be similar, the specific details (as was the case with each distinctive Asian society) are unique and unprecedented. Because of communication technologies [i.e.-Internet-SYX] and higher standards of literacy [i.e. public education-SYX], greater amounts of information about the dharma can now be disseminated far more rapidly to far more people than was ever possible in the past [i.e. OPB's use of distance-learning for non-local students-SYX]. Likewise, the religious freedom allowed in modern societies [what we collectively call "liberal democratic societies"-SYX] coupled with the ease and speed of travel has enabled a far wider variety of Buddhist traditions to appear in a far shorter time than was ever the case when Buddhism made its way into an Asian country.*" For an example of this last statement, we need only look to our lineage, where in only four generations the dharma of OPB has moved from mainland China to the US with dramatic though continuous transformation.

Page 3, Paragraph 2: Note here Batchelor's remarks about the preeminent role of historicity in Western thought and its general absence in Asian thought: "*Tibetan lamas I have spoken to find the very use of the term 'Tibetan Buddhism' offensive. 'The dharma we teach is not 'Tibetan',' they would retort, 'it is the pure and complete teaching of the Buddha, passed down through an unbroken lineage of enlightened beings.'*" This sentiment was also shared by the famous Japanese Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki who said Zen is "pure Buddhism that is beyond historical influence." From Batchelor's perspective *and* ours in OPB, this misses critical layers of understanding and eludes

rigorous self-honesty *within* a cultural expression of Buddhism. Remember that the Buddha taught *all things* in this Universe (including Buddhism itself) are impermanent and contingently-derived from the causal stream. Batchelor reinforces this point in paragraph 5 of page 3: *"Since they arise from conditions, schools of Buddhism share the very nature of the conditioned things they tirelessly describe as transient, imperfect and empty. This is true even of the original Indian form of the dharma at the time of Gautama himself."*

Page 3, Paragraph 3-4: The example of Zen Buddhism as contingently-derived from its unique historicocultural setting is made clear in these paragraphs. Batchelor says, *"Historical consciousness is founded in an awareness of the contingency of any cultural or religious form. Thus Zen Buddhism, for example, can be seen to emerge contingently out of the encounter between certain contemplative practices of Indian Buddhism and a complex set of conditions that prevailed in China around the beginning of the Tang period (and then later on in Korea and Japan). Such conditions would include everything from the spiritual aspirations of the Chinese people to the economic and political circumstances of Chinese society at the time."* Next, Batchelor points out the inability of any Buddhist school to claim a realistic connection (in an *unbroken* sense) to the Buddha: *"As part of their rhetoric of legitimacy, though, Zen Buddhists have constructed a lineage of teachers that famously traces itself back uninterruptedly to the moment when the Buddha held up a flower and his disciple Mahakashyapa smiled. Without seeking to diminish the significance of such a claim for practitioners, the historicity of this 'lineage' simply does not withstand critical scrutiny."* The point this claim to an unbroken lineage serves, functionally speaking, is to solidify the mission of modern monks with that of Buddha himself. This point is important, but as Batchelor says in paragraph 4: *"The legitimacy of Zen (or any other form of) Buddhism does not, however, need to rest on belief in the timelessness of an essential Zen Buddhism that has miraculously been preserved unchanged over centuries."* And in an especially tangible analogy: *"Cultural forms of Buddhism can be compared to living organisms that survive through successful adaptations to the changing pressures of their environment."*

Page 3-4, Paragraph 5: Batchelor: *"To say that Buddhism is 'empty' is to recognize how it is nothing but an emergent property of unique and unrepeatably situations. Such an insight into the nature of things [as an emergent process-SYX] is entirely in keeping with the central Buddhist understanding of the inescapable contingency of existence (pratitya samutpada). 'Whoever sees contingency,' declared Gautama, 'sees dharma; and whoever sees dharma sees buddha.' This core insight into contingency emphasizes how everything emerges from a shimmering matrix of changing conditions and is destined to change into something else."* Moreover, *"The emptiness does not deny the reality of Buddhism but reveals each of its forms to lack a solid, fixed essence. A tradition--be it Theravada, Vajrayana [Tibetan Buddhism] or Zen--comes into being as a dynamic display of conditions. Only as such can it function as a living path to awakening. If it possessed an unchanging essence, it would, as Nagarjuna insists, be inert and ineffective. In this way the non-essentialist [or "contingent"-SYX] vision of the dharma converges seamlessly with an evolutionary and historical understanding of life."*

Page 4, Paragraph 4: Batchelor cites a famous pragmatist, George Santayana: "*Those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.*" Here is but one reason history matters!

Page 4, Paragraph 5: Here we see Batchelor support the idea that no Buddhist school can claim superiority over another: "*In keeping with the non-essentialist outlook of Buddhism, such an historical perspective would question how any particular form of Buddhism could be intrinsically superior to any other.*"

Page 4-5, Paragraph 6: "*Such an historically informed, non-essentialist view would emphasize how Buddhism is a dynamic cultural process unfolding over time rather than a fixed body of ideas and practices that is preserved without change in a timeless vacuum. Buddhism's capacity to exhibit such startlingly different forms is an inspiring demonstration of its vitality. As a cultural movement Buddhism has survived and will survive not by preserving some hypothetical essence but by freely and creatively reinventing itself in response to changing circumstances.*" And here is where OPB finds itself.

Page 5, Paragraph 2-5: Here Batchelor emphasizes the role of language and translation in the transmission of the dharma, and how "*any act of translation, even the most scrupulously 'literal' one, is an act of interpretation.*" There is much pressure on translators to choose a term that is both meaningful to the new culture and close to the original meaning. But a given translation is not "right"; it is only a possible translation among many, and might be replaced by a more suitable translation at another time. And example is the more pervasive but less helpful "no-self" from *anatta/anatman*. "Selflessness" is arguably a more helpful term in English since it avoid the idea of literally "no self," which is not what the Buddha meant by *anatta/anatman*. Nonetheless, "*we know from history that [the interpretation of Buddhism from one culture to another] has happened successfully again and again. On each occasion the choices made by translators have allowed access to previously unknown Buddhist ideas and at the same time helped trigger the emergence of another distinctive culture of awakening. Each such culture was neither utterly identical with nor entirely difference from the one that preceded it.*" In the last paragraph of this page, Batchelor points out how traditional teachers are, at times, forced to make a novel interpretation when they enter a culture that asks different questions than their own.

Page 6, Paragraph 1-2: Batchelor points out some truisms that we have already experienced in OPB: "*The irresistible flow of changing conditions does not painlessly propel the dharma across new frontiers...as Buddhism becomes more widespread in the West, increasing internal divisions are liable to become apparent within the Buddhist community itself. 'Buddhism' does not denote a single coherent orthodoxy but serves as a loose generic term for a wide spectrum of schools, lineages, teachings and practices.*"

With Palms Together _^_
Shi Yong Xiang