

Going Back to the Source

A conversation with Stephen Batchelor and Henry Shukman

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Stephen Batchelor: Where should we start? Well the topic is “Going Back to the Source,” and I guess you know that I’ve trained as a Buddhist monk in different traditions, including the Zen tradition in Korea. And one of the reasons that I trained in Zen is because I wanted to really connect with the, you know, the source of my own questioning—you know, what it means to be human. And Buddhism as a historical, religious tradition is basically an extended answer to that question. But I think very often when you tease out the answer you sometimes lose the question and you become more interested in perpetuating a set of answers than actually reconnecting with the core of your own life, which is the fundamental koan, the fundamental question.

Henry Shukman: That’s exactly how we do it in Zen, as you know. One of the three essentials of Zen that were formulated by Hakuin in the 1000s is precisely what he called “The Great Doubt.” And he said, you know, “Where there’s great doubt, there’s great awakening.” You can’t miss it. And “The Great Doubt” means the great question; it means fundamentally sort of settling down within, looking within and asking “Who am I?” and “What is this?” What is this experience that I’m—that I am apparently having? And how is the “I” who’s having it? So that, I mean, I can totally relate to your view of Zen in that regard—that it’s much more about the question than about any answer. And one of the things we see again and again in Zen law, Zen history, and of course in the koan is a master offering a putative kind of an answer only to take it away again. And a classic case is Basho or Mazu who used to teach “Your very mind, that’s Buddha.” And he said, he was asked once, “Why do you teach that way?” And he said, “Well, it’s just something I say to stop babies from crying.”

Henry Shukman: And then he was asked, “Well, what do you say when they’ve stopped crying?” And then I say, “No mind. No Buddha.”

Stephen Batchelor: What’s interested me though is that I resonate very deeply with that kind of language. But it often feels that the early Buddhist tradition in India doesn’t speak that way at all. And we think of this sort of thing as very typically Zen. And my sense of being a Buddhist, a follower of the Buddha, is not restricted merely to my Zen practice. And, in fact, most of my work in the last years has actually been about going back to another source and that is the earliest record we have of what the Buddha said. Now you won’t find in any of the discourses of the Pali canon statements like “Great doubt, great awakening.” So are they missing something? I don’t think so.

I think that what we often miss sight of in the early canon is that everything the Buddha says is actually his own authentic response to the questions that arose for him as a young person. And in the legend of the Buddha, as we know well, this means growing up in a life of privilege and then one day going outside of the palace and seeing a corpse, seeing an old person, seeing a sick person, seeing a wandering monk and on each occasion realizing—or, in a sense, seeing as a reflection—in those people the question of his own life.

And it was when he’d witnessed, as it were, that he would die, he would get sick, he would grow old, his life at that moment became a question for him. And the years he then spent doing

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different kinds of meditation and so forth and so on were basically an ongoing attempt to come to terms with, to reconcile, to resolve this question. And I can only understand his awakening under the Bodhi tree, as well we all know, as essentially his response to that koan. And, when he starts to teach, he is essentially teasing out and explicating what his response was. But Buddhism, as I've already said, when it becomes a religious institution gets pre-occupied with the answers and very often loses sight of the question.

Henry Shukman: Right, right. Well, the word “awakening” as we understand it in the line that I'm in, it's an interesting matter. Because in traditional Zen there's a sort of a view that there kind of is something to go through; there is a kind of shift that can happen in our consciousness. And what we might call, say, a moment of awakening, you know, a sudden glimpse of another, well, not really of anything; really not of anything.

And you look at the stories of the old masters. I mean, for example, Master Kyogen who was a student of Isan, and he was given a question by Isan, which was “What is your original face before your parents were born?” Show me who you are from before the time your parents were born right now. And he went and studied his scriptures, trying to find an answer and he couldn't find one, and he was distraught and spent a few nights up all night trying to find something that he could bring back to Isan.

Eventually, he goes back there and he says, “I can't find an answer.” And Isan actually says, “Well, I could tell you but it wouldn't do you any good. I could give you an answer, but it wouldn't help you.” So then he goes off very despondent and becomes an itinerant laborer and years later he's taking care of a shrine in the countryside somewhere and while he's sweeping the yard he flicks a pebble against a stalk of bamboo and it makes a knock, a little knock, “Ping.” Ping. One knock, actually, and when he hears it, “Ah!” Something happens.

So what happens? You know, he's changed according to the Zen records. He changed totally by that moment and he's then, you know, he becomes a master and so on. What actually happens in that moment, well he doesn't say, “You know, I have now found ‘X’; I have now attained ‘Y.’” He simply says in his verse commemorating the moment, he says, “I've forgotten everything I ever knew. I now don't know anything,” basically. And I think he really means everything, you know, the whole world and all my views of it are gone. And even the “me” that I thought I knew is gone. So the—what would we call it?—the insight, the revelation, the epiphany is not into a new known. It's more a dismantling of knowing.

Henry Shukman: And I think this is a—I mean that's how we see it in the line I'm in. And it's really important because it can turn very easily. That kind of moment can turn into a kind of a thing and then become another kind of attachment and then, in a sense, we're sort of back to square one. So the old map of Zen, known as the “Ox Herding Pictures,” with ten stages in it—the first four are really concerned with sort of seeing what, having this kind of release and becoming, in a sense, sort of, you might say, stable in that reconstructing doesn't happen as much. But then the next six pictures are concerned with getting rid even of that so that there

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really isn't anything left to hold onto. It's just I'm a little bit thirsty now. Well, it's very nice to be with you Stephen, by the way.

Stephen Batchelor: Yes, it is. Great. Well, you see, curiously—or maybe not curiously—the oldest account we find in the Pali text where the Buddha recounts his awakening; it's in the discourse on the noble quest and the paragraph in which he talks of this, he says that it's very difficult for people who love, delight and revel in their place to see this ground, the ground of conditioned arising, contingency, life and to see this ground, nirvana, which is the falling away of reactivity.

So his—likewise, he does not describe his awakening in terms of coming to know something. The word “to know” with the root, *jna* in Pali-Sanskrit, doesn't occur in this passage. The awakening is described, on the one hand, as a coming to see something and on other hand—and I think this is probably the main point—as a radical shift in perspective. In other words, a shift in perspective from where one is preoccupied with what we call “your place”—and by that it means everything we identify with, you know, your nation, your social position, your belief system, your political views—as long as you're preoccupied with that stuff, you cannot see your ground.

So the Buddha's awakening was not a sudden revelation, a privileged knowing about the nature of reality. He doesn't mention that at all. He talks about letting go of a certain kind of preoccupation with “me” and “my stuff” and “my position” in order to see the ground—one's own ground, the ground, as it were, of life, of being itself. And that ground is twofold. On the one hand, it's the process of contingency and life itself, which of course is not actually much like a ground at all. If anything, it's a groundless ground. It's, again, this idea of something total drops away.

Your sense of position and certainty, it falls away. And what you fall into is not some other permanent state, like, you know, God or something; but contingency itself, which is bottomless, which is fluid, which is constantly unfolding and that ground is seen from the perspective of this very difficult term, nirvana, which here simply means the stopping of reactivity, the stopping of grasping and hating and fearing. And that, to me, is very close, in fact, to what you just said about your Zen master.

So, to me, the traditions meet in these kind of fundamental experiences. And the history of Buddhism, in a sense, the history of consolidating those views till they become so sort of rigid and fixed that they cease to serve their function any longer and that brings up a counter-movement. And the origins of Chan, Zen in China, are basically a return to the source. They're a dropping of the Buddhist metaphysics, of all of the power structures of these great monasteries, and they're returning to exactly what the Buddha did all those years ago: just sit down and come to terms with who you are, what is going on and that's, I think, both the alpha and the omega, to use Christian terminology, of the whole practice.

Henry Shukman: Yeah, yeah, beautiful. Well, that's exactly what we do here in the zendo.

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We don't really have very elaborate practices in Zen. You know, there's no visualization, there's no mantras, there's no gradual practice, actually. We don't build it up step-by-step. We actually—we sort of go cold turkey: we're thrown on the cushion and “be still” and, you know, “see what happens.”

In fact Master—who was it?—Master Zuigan, you know, he was asked “How are the stages of practice ordered?” He said, “they're not ordered.” And the monks said, “Why are they not ordered?” And he said, “Because there are not stages of practice.” It's all right here, now. There's nothing more to be found than just this. And, yet, can we actually sort of receive this or have we got so many opinions about it? I mean the third Chinese ancestor, Sosan, you know, he said, “All you do in this practice is discard opinions.”

You know, discard opinions pro and con, basically. That's all you do. That's all there is to be done. And so this, actually, what you were just saying about—I forget your word, but sort of cessation of reactivity, dropping reactivity.

Stephen Batchelor: Yeah, the fading away, the dropping of reactivity.

Henry Shukman: Right, right. Well, this is exactly what Sosan is talking about in the “Shin Jin Mei,” his famous poem on having faith in mind. There's just mind itself. Experience of consciousness itself is it. Now I don't know whether I'm—what, this is exactly the moment to, but I want to just point out something that struck me as quite remarkable as somebody who comes from a rather classical educational background. I grew up studying Latin from the age of nine and Greek from the age of eleven and started a PhD on Homer, which I never finished, but Plato actually talked about the destroying of hypotheses. Just getting rid of, you know, doing away with hypotheses—theories or hypotheses or what we might call “views of how things are, which is rather interesting, that there, too, in Greek philosophy, which was much more practical in a sense than modern philosophy, you know.

It's all about how to live, finding how to be happy, essentially, or at least how to be at peace, we might say how to be at peace with the way things are. Even there, which somehow I was certainly schooled to think of as rationalist while something like Zen was very much not rationalist, it was kind of crazy, mystical stuff, you know, as opposed to the cornerstone of Western rationalism, you know. But, actually, remarkably—

Stephen Batchelor: It's already there.

Henry Shukman: It's already there.

Stephen Batchelor: Yeah, as you're speaking two things come to mind. First is this idea of Nagarjuna, the great 2nd-Century Buddhist philosopher. But, again, we need to think philosopher in that original Greek sense of a real love of wisdom where you actually transform your life. But he understands emptiness, which is often raised up as a very difficult metaphysical idea. He says, “The Buddhas say that emptiness is letting go of opinions. It's letting go of views. Believers in

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emptiness,” he says, “are incurable.” So I don’t think it’s an accident that Nagarjuna was also within the lineage of the Chan Zen tradition. This is, I think, the same idea.

Now it’s often thought also that early Buddhism, particularly when it’s thought of as, you know, the sort of Abhidhamma and the Theravada doctrines and so on, is very much a classic example of the sort of gradual path that Zen rebelled against. But, once again, if we go back to one of the earliest statements—it’s almost a slogan of early Buddhism—which I have no reason to doubt probably goes back to the Buddha himself, he says, “The Dharma,” which means conditionality, nirvana, the letting go of reactivity, this embrace of life.

“The Dharma is clearly visible.” It’s *sanditthiko*. It’s clearly visible. It’s right before your eyes. And he says, “It is *akaliko*,” which Bhikkhu Bodhi translates as “immediate.” The word, in fact, is “time” and “less”: “a” and “*kaliko*”. But what that means is this: if something is clearly visible here and now, you don’t need a sequence of stages in time to get to it. And so to translate the Dhamma as immediate, unmediated, clearly visible.

And he says, “Inviting, uplifting, intuited by the wise.” This is a phrase that just runs again and again through the canon. Nirvana is also described as clearly visible, immediate, inviting, uplifting, intuited by the wise. Now this could come out of a Zen text. So what I find, again, is you go back to the origins of Zen. You go back into Nagarjuna’s philosophy. You go back to the most original sections of the early canon and we come very much to this very primordial, very—in a sense—non-conceptual opening one’s eyes and being—in a sense—dumbstruck by the fact that there’s anything happening at all.

And there you get to, again, this sense of wonder which is at the root of Aristotle, Plato. They both recognize that the origin of philosophy is wonder. It’s a sense of being astonished, a sense of waking up to the fact that you’re here rather than not here. And I would take that also to be what the Buddha was awakened to on seeing sick person, old person, corpse. What that shocked him, I believe, into understanding was, “Shit, I’m alive. What the hell does this mean? What is this about?” And then to stay with that question, essentially, you know, for six years, to struggle with that question. There’s a wonderful Zen expression, which says you should gnaw on your question like as though you’re chewing a metal rod. Which is a rather horrible idea. But it very much communicates this sense of unconditioned urgency. Unconditioned urgency.

Henry Shukman: Yeah, Dahui said it’s the point in one of the *upaya*, or hopefully “skillful means,” that we use in Zen is koan study. And he said, “Going deeply into a koan is like a kind of trap they used to have for rats, an ox horn trap.” They’d put a little bit of sweet oil deep inside the tip of the ox horn and the rat would force itself in further and further and further; trying to get to the sweet oil until it was stuck and couldn’t get out. And the idea being that we’re getting more and more sort of stuck in our question—that the fundamental question, exactly as you say, of “What is this? Who am I? What is this experience going on right now?”

The koan is a means to investigate that, but it’s not really so much to investigate it as simply to get stuck in it. And through being stuck—I mean rather like Kyogen, stuck with a question about the original face—he couldn’t resolve it and he also couldn’t let it go. But because we’re so

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thwarted, because we're so stuck, it can happen in that that we actually as it were, suddenly discover the nature of stuckness—that it's not what it seemed. That the very stuckness is—it turns into a kind of great freedom.

Now what is the nature of that freedom? I'm going to pick up a little bit, not quite as elegantly as I would like to, but on what you were saying about Nagarjuna—that one of Nagarjuna's most well known statements is the so-called "four-fold negation": that you can say of a thing that "It neither is nor is not, nor both is and is not, and nor neither is nor is not." In other words, you can't say of it anything final. Now, obviously, this flies right in the face of sort of our ordinary, conditioned way of thinking: that something is here or it's not here, something is either this hand or it's everything else—there's not this hand. And he's precisely—so actually in logic there is a term, the "Law of the Excluded Middle," that, you know, if it's "A," it's "A" and if it's "Not A," it must not be "A."

Stephen Batchelor: "A."

Henry Shukman: So "A" and "Not A" are mutually exclusive. There is no middle: the Law of the Excluded Middle. But what Nagarjuna is saying completely breaks that down and I wonder whether—oh, this is a bit speculative, but it seems to me that the nature of the freedom that we can find through Zen training is something like a sort of secret capacity of the excluded middle, that if we—and this is why so many masters actually talk about the training as fundamentally impossible. It's completely here, completely apparent, as he says "in plain sight," and yet somehow it's impossible to get there.

"If you go towards it, you go against it," said Nansen. Yakusan said, "A calf must be born of a bull." Now how's that going happen? Because, you know, the view of yes-and-no, is-and-is-not, either-is-or-is-not is so sort of absolute to us—that how do we possibly release it? And, of course, that goes with a view of basically of "me" onboard, in here, in this skin bag, there's a captain or something—a little manager, a little troublemaker—a little tyrant called "Me", you know, who's looking out at everything else.

There's "Me" and "Not Me." And so how is this law, the Excluded Middle, transcended? Well, somehow, apparently, it truly can be. We—our human consciousness is endowed with a capacity to transcend it or to see it in a radically new way—by which it is transcended and that brings—I mean this is all pragmatic, remember? It does bring a great freedom to a human being as well as it makes a lot of changes. Well, my wife thinks it has made a lot of changes in me, so, I'm happy to hope she's right.

Stephen Batchelor: Well, it's again, I'm going to bring this further back to an earlier source still. There's one discourse—only one discourse—that Nagarjuna cites by name in the "Mulamadhyamakakarika," the "Verses on the Middle Way" and that's the Kaccanagotta Sutta. The Kaccanagotta Sutta's in the Pali canon and this is what it says—this is the text he refers to. He says the Buddha is asked by Kaccanagotta: "What is complete vision?" or "right view," as it's sometimes translated. And the Buddha's reply is: "For the most part, people in this world are

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trapped in the duality of it-is-and-it-is-not. But for one who sees with complete wisdom or intelligence the arising of the world, there is no “It is not.”

And for one who with complete intelligence sees the ceasing of the world there is not “It is.” So the root of Nagarjuna’s vision, which then is expanded in Zen, again, goes back to these early sources we find in Pali. So this vision the Buddha is inculcating is a vision in which we let go of, as you say, the grammar of ordinary language, the Law of the Excluded Middle, either “is” or “is not.” When you experience life as it is unfolding with what he calls sammapanna, complete intelligence, an intelligence that’s not restricted by the Law of the Excluded Middle, you find that life—that the coming and going of experience and things—is not reducible to either “it is” or “it is not.” That language is incapable of capturing the fluid process of what we call life itself.

So again, it's letting go of a deeply embedded habit of mine that probably is a consequence of language which is a consequence of the human brain having grown to a certain size, and having become self aware, and having come to be able to represent itself. So the challenge of Zen, the challenge of Nagarjuna, the challenge of the Buddha is actually to transcend something which is not just a bad mental habit but actually something that's deeply and structurally rooted in how human beings have evolved. And this is why it's called “The Great Matter,” for example, in Zen.

This is what we're dealing with and in a sense we're already contradicting ourselves by talking about it and having this conversation. We're going into “is” and “is not.” So we can't help ourselves and Zen, although it says to be beyond, what is it, how does it go, through direct transmission from mind to mind, no dependence on words and scriptures, which Buddhist tradition has produced the most scriptures?

Stephen Batchelor: I know, I know. It's shameful; it's a disgrace.

Henry Shukman: But it's not a disgrace; it's a recognition that we are linguistic beings and as such we're able to entertain these ideas, we're able to read these texts, we're able to follow these instructions. And this brings us to...

Stephen Batchelor: May I just...

Henry Shukman: Yes.

Stephen Batchelor: Before we go, it is really a matter of using language to go beyond language.

Henry Shukman: Yeah.

Stephen Batchelor: That's what many, many koans are basically doing. They're verbal formulations. Yes they're often enigmatic, inscrutable, and frankly infuriating, but actually they contain a tremendous power and a tremendous compassion. Most koans in this—I mean in the line I'm in, we study something like 670 and they're all at some time or other helped somebody be precisely released from “is” and “is not,” from I and everything else. So in a sense they

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contain that potential. See there's one other thing I want to say: that this impossible release, actually interestingly is picked up or expressed rather beautifully in a Christian work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 14th-Century mystical manual basically and its author, who's not known, at one point says, "How long does the work of God take? The work of God takes only an atom," and an atom was the smallest unit of time that they had, it was 1/64th of a second, that it's just small, that little shift that's basically sort of made of nothing. It's one molecule or one proton jumps and suddenly it happens.

And this is like, again, Sōsan who said, "Just a hair's breadth of separation and it's the distance between heaven and Earth." Just one little tiny grain of a sense of separation presumably caused by the thought of me and I'm excluded actually, I'm kept out of a kind of ground, the groundless ground. That will put me back in my place, not in this groundless ground. And Yakusan again said something like, "I can't find one square inch to stand on anywhere." Well Lin-Chi talks of a leaning on nothing.

Henry Shukman: Right. And Bodhidharma comes in to the emperor having spent three years traveling from India to China at the age of 127 and the emperor asks him, "What's the highest, holiest truth?" And he just says, "Nothing holy, vast void, clear and empty, vast and clear, nothing."

Stephen Batchelor: And then the emperor says, "And who are you then?" And Bodhidharma says, "I don't know."

Henry Shukman: And actually it starts with the emperor saying, "I've been a great sponsor of Buddhism, I've built all these temples and monasteries, I've funded and sponsored many monks, how much merit have I acquired?" Bodhidharma says, "No merit whatsoever." It's not in that system of merit acquisition leading to another life and another life and gradually working your way up until maybe you can be a monk and then maybe you can have an auspicious enough birth that you'll attain nirvana; it's not in that system, it's right here now and it always is and yet it is still hard, hidden in plain sight.

Stephen Batchelor: Yeah. Well again, one impression I think we've already been perpetuating largely in this conversation is that this is material that is highly distinctive of Zen, of Nagarjuna, of Buddhism, it's eastern mysticism, it's something quite foreign to our own tradition. We've already alluded to Plato and Aristotle. But we have to remember that there was another movement in Greek philosophy that started with a man called Pyrrho of Elis who was a philosopher. He was influenced by people like Democritus who was one of the early atomists. But the important thing that happened to Pyrrho was that he was invited by Alexander the Great to join his army, which was setting out to conquer the Persian Empire which it did. And Alexander did not think of himself as just a kind of money grubbing warlord; he saw himself as a civilizing influence.

Henry Shukman: A philosopher in arms.

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Stephen Batchelor: A philosopher in arms. And so he brought philosophers with him, one of whom was Pyrrho. And the Greek records describe how when they got to India, Pyrrho started with the Gymnosophists which literally means the naked sages—probably that means sages who didn't wear as many clothes as the Greeks did. Whether they were literally starkers, we don't know. I doubt it. But in any case, when Pyrrho returned to Greece he established the school of skepticism and one of the few fragments that survives from his school is the statement where he says that, "Our senses and our language cannot be trusted, they cannot communicate truth, they cannot communicate falsity,"—that we need to recognize that things no more are than they are not, that they neither both are and are not and they neither, it always gets complicated.

You did it very well—neither “are” nor “not are.” Now this of course is the famous tetralemma that we find in Nagarjuna and we find also in the early canonical texts of Buddhism. Pyrrho—like the Indian Gymnosophists that he would have studied with certainly like the early Buddhists—did not see that realization that we cannot speak of these things, we cannot know anything with certainty simply as a kind of intellectual or academic insight. He says by allowing the mind to come to rest in that radical uncertainty—that radical unknowing leads to what he calls aphantos which means speechlessness.

And aphantos leads to ataraxia. Ataraxia literally means untroubledness, a deep peace perhaps. But like we find in Buddhist language, he too uses negatives to affirm what is: it's not this, not this, it is not it is, not is not. And although there's still a scholarly debate going on as to whether this idea had its origins in India or whether this idea was already there somewhere in Greece, the jury is still out on that. But the important point for me is that Pyrrho, the founder of the school we now call skepticism, is very likely in my opinion to have had his core awakening through his encounter with India tradition whether or not he went Buddhist as such, we don't know.

But the point is Pyrrho was like the sages of India—someone who thought to put this teaching into practice. Philosophy meant to radically change the way you live in the world; it wasn't just getting a good understanding. So what I think of when we now go back to the source—not of Zen and Buddhism and Nagarjuna—we go back to the source of our own tradition, we go back to the source of the kind of inquiry that eventually led to the European enlightenment, the Renaissance, people like Montaigne in the 16th-Century were trying to practice Pyrrhonism. So when Buddhists today read the essays of Montaigne they say, "Hey, that's kind of Buddhist." There might be a good reason for that.

Henry Shukman: Yeah, we all have inherited a misconception about the division of...

Stephen Batchelor: East and West.

Henry Shukman: Eastern thought and Western thought, and it's quite remarkable actually. I mean not only—I mean Alexander, I mean set up an empire, a single political entity that included much of Western India and Greece in a single entity. Prior to that there were two Persian empires, both of which included a piece of India and a piece of the Eastern Greek territories already back in the 6th-Century B.C. So what happened I think in the West is that

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European imperial colonialism needed to believe that classical Greece was a kind of humanist miracle without precedent because it justified European superiority.

What Aimé Césaire called the White man's superiority complex—that because of that it was fine for us to go about the world subjugating peoples because we were the inheritors of something that hadn't happened anywhere else, which was a kind of humanist enlightened revelation, basically that was encapsulated in Athens in the 5th-Century, something like that. But actually that story really leaves out an enormous fact which is that Greece itself had been linked not only through the polity of the Persian empire but through trade that now is thought to have been far more extensive than previously believed. But the idea that there were these two parallel worlds that knew nothing about each other is just a great falsehood.

Stephen Batchelor: No, it's a total fiction.

Henry Shukman: Yeah, and I mean I find that deeply reassuring. And one of the things that used to sort of bother me a bit when I got into Zen in the first place was that my dad, who's a thoroughly rational Oxford professor; he was just so supportive, a very kind guy, was supportive of everybody basically including his son doing this strange thing called Zen. But then it seemed really foreign and exotic. And I would try to explain it and I'd see his eyes glazing over. So I'd say, "Yeah, but what is it?" — "Well, you know, you meditate and you..." — "What's that? Why that?"

And anyways I'd try to explain. He never really bought it. And yet why did it feel so natural, so sort of somehow intrinsic to being human and not foreign at all, it made me feel much less foreign actually. In fact it helped me discover a very deep kind of belongingness in the family of things, which I'd never had. And I thank Zen for that, my Zen teachers of course. So to discover that there are in fact possible, maybe a bit speculative, but possible shared roots or at least shared exchange going right back into the beginnings of the Greek miracle—and Buddhism I find very reassuring, that we're not doing something that strange after all, we're not doing anything exotic and foreign really at all.

Stephen Batchelor: No, I think the same. I think that what might be, in a sense, the long term outcome of the current interest in Buddhism in the West is not discovering that Buddhism is another exclusive and superior tradition. It took sort of a counter move to European superiority; we now raise up everything Asian, but actually will be a means whereby we come to recover the common roots of our humanity.

Henry Shukman: I couldn't agree more.

Stephen Batchelor: What is weird though, although you're right, European enlightenment, European thinkers think of Greece as the beginning of our specialness. When you go back to look at the Greek histories that the Greeks wrote at the time, they had long believed that philosophy came from India—this was already in the texts. Also, there's this story that goes back an awful long time that the god Dionysus was banished from Greece and exiled to India. And

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when Alexander arrived in what is now Pakistan, according to one record at least, he met Greek communities.

What is perhaps even more striking is that there is one discourse in the Pali Canon, the Assalayana Sutta, the discourse to Assalayana in the middle length discourse is where the Buddha is debating with a Brahman. The Brahman is saying, "People are born and there is a divinely ordained caste system that is immutable and the Buddhist says, "But look at the outlying countries like the Yona and Cambodia. Yona is Ionia, Greece. In Ionia, in Greece they have two classes, masters and slaves, and they're thoroughly interchangeable. This is in the Pali Canon, a reference to Greece. They're probably Greek communities that could have been the descendants of the followers of Dionysus who were already settled in the Punjab.

We know, for example, also in terms of the extraordinary distances people are able to cover, the early Greek records all agree that at the Battle of Thermopylae, which took place I think 100 miles west of Athens in 480 B.C.E., this was the Persian attempt to conquer Greece. In the Persian army were Indian soldiers, elephants, people from basically the Punjab. Even further back when Darius I wanted to expand the Persian Empire further east into Gandhara, he sent scouts, we'd call them now. This was in 520 B.C.

The Battle of Thermopylae, by the way, took place in the year the Buddha was born. But 40 years before then, Darius employed a Greek called Scylax of Caryanda to go and check the river systems of the Indus to see where the Indus came out in the sea in order to prepare for the invasion. In modern scholarship is a Russian scholar who's looked into the work of Scylax and has found it's very likely in fact that he even went as far as the Ganges—went out into the Bay of Bengal, down to Sri Lanka and back. So all of this shows, you know, as you say, the cross traffic of trade, of ideas, of cultures, of movements of men and women of armies of people was going on long before the Buddha. It disrupts and undermines this whole notion of the East and the West. That I think is a language that's just passed itself by day and needs to just be dropped.

Henry Shukman: And this is really sort of hopeful, I find, for the future of maybe we'll just call it mediation practice. I mean Zen basically means meditation. So we don't need to be inheritors of religious institutions that aren't very congenial to us. Many of us who have come to something like Zen don't particularly want religious institutions anyway. We may have had unhappy experiences of patriarchal hierarchical...

Stephen Batchelor: Hierarchical structures.

Henry Shukman: We don't like it and find it's rampant with hypocrisy for example. So maybe there will be a new formation that's bubbling up already that takes what is essential of the Zen tradition. I believe Zen does have a huge amount to offer us here and now as we are precisely because it's so focused on this moment and simply surrendering to it, studying it, coming at it in a number of ways, to have a more intimate relationship with life.

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But actually if we can sort of know that we're open also to our own tradition, the root of our own tradition which are basically deeply skeptical and questioning, it's the same thing. This is maybe a bit glib but the Socratic method is questioning. And skepticism is about questioning and doubting and the root of the word is doubt. If we can find a way to sort of evolve and accommodate—well, really, it's sort of the study of who we are and how to be in a better way.

And if that study can incorporate or at least sort of send roots down into what are in a sense, really are already our own cultural roots and meanwhile we've got a practice that's allowing us to sort of tap into the roots of being human in a sense of just what it is to be human; have a human consciousness in a human body in a web of relationships. And to find that actually there's a great foregoing web of relationships that has been doing this in known and lesser known ways for thousands of years and that we can learn from their trial and error basically. I mean, I find that a very, very hopeful vision for all of us. I hope we're around long enough as a species to see it happen. But if we are, I think it's rather exciting.

Stephen Batchelor: I think it's exciting. I think also if I were a younger person today, I would feel a much greater affirmation in terms of belonging to a global community. If I had a philosophy, a practice, a way of life that wasn't identified with either West or East, in some ways I think those of us in our generation are basically, we're in a transitional phase I think. I think our lives in modernity particularly recent modernity where Buddhist and Hindu and Sufi ideas and so on, have begun to sort of really take root in our culture. I think that's a transitional phase and I think reluctantly as we might personally be, I think we have to also be able to be willing to let go of Zen...

Henry Shukman: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, no, I...

Stephen Batchelor: ...to let go of the Pali Canon or whatever and cease to sort of give it such unquestioning authority because what we're facing as a human community is we're now especially having to do with things like the Internet. It's impossible not to feel part of a global village, as McLuhan presciently saw in the 1960s. And the kind of response that we're going to have to rise to—particularly if climate change degrades the quality of life triggering enormous social, political upheavals which will initially affect the less privileged on the planet—we're going to have to tap very deep not into our own sectarian or into our own European or Asian traditions, we're going to have to go beyond that. We're going to have to somehow tap into a common source; we're going to have to return really to what it means fundamentally to be a human creature inhabiting this Earth. So I feel hopeful but I don't feel complacent at all.

Henry Shukman: Beautifully put. Well you know, funnily enough, Alexander the Great had a kind of utopian ideal of what he called homonoia which means basically like-mindedness, noia, mind and homo, same.

And it was expressly that the Eastern parts of the empire, India and the middle part, the Near East as they called it, the Persia and so on and the West, the Greek world would all have ultimately homonoia, one mind. And philosophy was his hope for that coming about, which is

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rather like my master's master, Yamada Cohen, who passionately believed that all human beings are the same fundamental nature which can only be found when you really let go of all the things we've been talking about. And in that nature, he said, it isn't really anything, and yet to find it, that is the hope for the human race, he thought.

Stephen Batchelor: But of course we have to go beyond humans now. And I've always been struck by how in the early Buddhists, in Mahayana Buddhism, there's this constant emphasis not on the whole of humanity but on *sabbe satta*, all sentient beings. And that I think is the kind of commonality, the kind of identity, I think are called upon now to realize, that it's not—the humans are just one of many species, a relatively recent arrival on the scene who's wreaked an incredible amount of damage. And I think what these practices and what this philosophy might lead to is not to sort of a common humanity or humanism but actually to a really heartfelt identity with everything that lives and breathes on this Earth.

