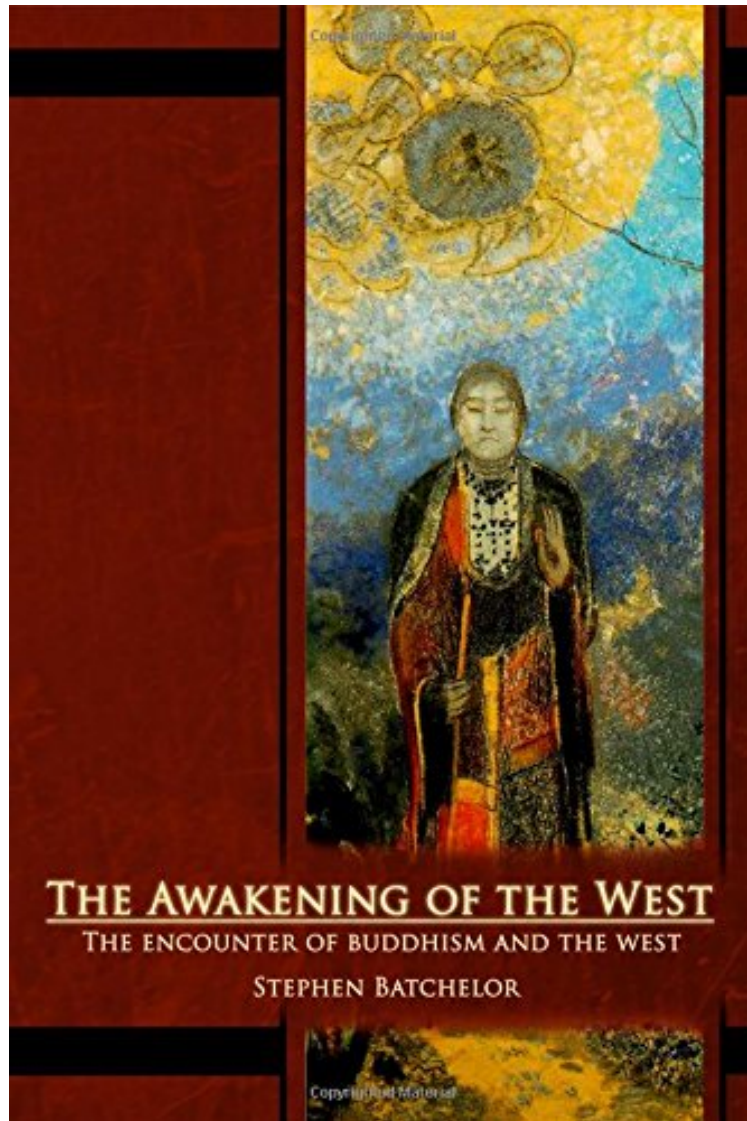


# The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture

Stephen Batchelor

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**Stephen Batchelor : The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture:

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West--through the Alexander the Great etc0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Janicenone11 of 14 people found the following review helpful. How the dharma came to the West, and back East againBy John L Murphy"The Encounter of Buddhism Western Culture" examines two millennia of Europe's vexed and visionary experiences when meeting what's not quite an Asian religion, but more than an exotic philosophy. Batchelor, a Scot who was both a Korean Zen and Indo-Tibetan monk before espousing an agnostic dharma interpretation, proves ideal for introducing the characters and meetings that confounded Jesuits and friars, excited explorers and mystics, and unsettled despots and dictators.He begins by listing five "attitudes" in the "long, uncertain relationship of the West with Buddhism." Blind indifference, self-righteous rejection, rational knowledge, romantic fantasy, and existential engagement. Outside of a few ancient Greek contacts, Europeans lacked knowledge until the 13th c. when Catholic clergy ventured far enough east. From then until the end of the 1800s, the West tended to denigrate or at least dismiss Eastern teachings. The Romantic movement broke with the Enlightenment by exaggerating the Oriental Other. Others in the 19th c. strove by reason to bring science to study the East, accompanying the colonial expansion.Finally, in the last century, a few Westerners started to practice Buddhism; until nearly 1970, however, most of those in Europe practically knew each other, so small were the numbers before the Tibetan diaspora and the counterculture built upon an earlier interest in Zen among the Beats and intellectuals to bring in the flourishing of Buddhism among many disaffected with traditional beliefs, alongside others blending the dharma with conventional faiths-- or psychotherapies-- today.Batchelor notes how in the 13th century of change, when Asia and Europe were roiled by political and military conflict, three traditions took root in Asia that in contemporary Europe now number the most adherents. Karma Kagyu became Chogyam Trungpa's Shambhala school; Soto Zen shifted with D.T. Suzuki's books and Shunryu Suzuki's San Francisco Zen Center Tassajara emerged from this California 1960s epicenter; Nichiren's insistent renewal allied with Japanese lay evangelism turned into Soka Gakkai worldwide.The Japanese and Chinese, faced with missionizing Jesuits, found their Asian tolerance strained by European claims that the truth lay only in the Catholic way. Batchelor fairly sets out the horrific tortures inflicted by the Tokugawa Shogunate upon the recalcitrant martyrs, but he also shows how rare a Buddhist-affiliated state has generated violence against its ideological foes, as opposed to the colonial and contemporary norms. Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and India: the list of places where Buddhism has fallen before tyrants lengthens in our own times.In Thailand and Southeast Asia, the movement for an engaged Buddhism tackling injustice and advocating pacificism takes up an eloquent chapter that shows how the "interbeing" of Thich Nhat Hanh and the "universal responsibility" of the Dalai Lama connect to overthrow the notion of Buddhism as a self-involved, nihilistic, dreary, and moribund religion. This notion, spread by Western philosophers, scholars, missionaries, and early translators, served to taint Buddhism for centuries, and still lingers in many prejudiced accounts we find now.Sir William Jones, who figured out in 1786 that Sanskrit was the root from which Indo-European languages sprouted, as with many British in India, ignored Buddhism. It had been wiped out by the Moghul invaders centuries before; it lingered in a few Himalayan redoubts beyond real contact with all but a few intrepid travellers. Hinduism regarded it with as much disdain as the West. "Jones believed that Buddha was the teutonic god Wotan or Odin." (233) This level of ignorance took many years to overcome.Eugene Burnouf (1801-52) stands out midway through the book as a diligent Sanskrit-adept investigator; his philological and Orientalist lessons would rub off on his student Ernest Renan who famously tried to historicize the life of Jesus. Extreme rationalism brought extreme prejudice; the hostility to a declining Catholicism exacerbated among Enlightenment-inspired intellectuals a dismissal of any elaborate rituals within the Buddhism imperial reports discussed. A Protestant-like Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Thailand became favored in the later 19th c. by Theosophists, colonial translators, and native reformers.Unknowingly, the search for an "Aryan" homeland to which Jesus retreated in his "lost years" for Indian wisdom, free from Jewish influence, provides a detour that Batchelor notes in passing. Antisemitism was fostered by European scholars bent on prying Judeo-Christian origins away from even the Gospels. Romantic Orientalism cast a long shadow over Indo-European studies. 19th c. German contributions that tried to push aside Latin Renaissance biases themselves have since then suffered by reputation. The barbarians were celebrated rather than Romans, via this search for Eastern origins for a purified "race" generated by Hindu and Buddhist distortions.Buddhism as such misreadings show is often misunderstood by us. It was misused to train kamikaze pilots; but it also inspired Soviet "samidzat" tracts and learning was preserved even in the gulags. Although many have tried to crush it, as we see in Asian totalitarian states today, many try to save it at the cost of their lives.Philology for rationalists, fantasy for romantics, but neither IE-professors or New Age dabblers pin the tail on this varied elephant, to adopt a Buddhist analogy! "To fix the elephant in space or time is to kill her. The elephant breathes and moves-- in ways one cannot foresee." (274) It's not an ethical system, psychology, philosophy, faith, mysticism, devotion, meditation, or therapy. But it can use all of these aspects. Batchelor, anticipating his 1997 book "Buddhism Without Beliefs," tells us that its "attitude towards life is neither rational nor non-rational; based neither on feeling, intuition nor sensation. Yet it includes them all."Finally, as Batchelor's own young monastic quest demonstrates, the counterculture allowed contact with real Buddhist practice for more than a few European scholars, officials, missionaries, or explorers. It's still in a "transitional" phase, and the book alternates often between historical accounts and recent adaptations of the various schools and movements as they journey westward, often brought by

Europeans training in Asian monasteries before going back home, but as often Asian monks and experts travelling to the West to start or assist at new centers across Europe and the Americas. "It required two World Wars, Hitler and Stalin, the threat of nuclear war and environmental destruction and, in many cases, a hefty dose of LSD to render Europeans sufficiently humble to seek their lost spiritual centre elsewhere." (275) Breaking the "grid of reason" and twisting the "dreams of romanticism," the dharma manages today to transcend, in Batchelor's view, a heretical Buddhist practice in Europe now. Protestant revolt had earlier broken Catholicism's "stranglehold" but also "ruptured the cohesion of the European soul." He finds Buddhist heresy a positive force; moving "outside the Judaeo-Christian-Hellenic tradition" forces adherents to choose the dharma in the same way that Asians do traditionally. Intriguingly, he finds: "It makes little sense to regard oneself as a Buddhist by birth." (276) The choice to practice, not one's birth culture or the bought door, makes one a Buddhist. While some of the chapters drag with recitals of names and dates that any history may find inescapable, especially one that pioneers study of its subject, as with the American counterpart, Rick Fields' "How the Swans Came to the Lake," (1992), Batchelor weaves many disparate strands into an intelligent narrative. He adds a short glossary, endnotes, a bibliography, and index that assist our comprehension of a saga stretching over two thousand years, and across half the earth in its quest. The middle of the volume, which takes on "Everyman" in his attempt to make Buddhism matter, provides the sharpest insights, as perhaps these energize from their author's own formation at this period of what's been labelled subsequently "methodological agnosticism" applied to the dharma's Western adoption and modernizing representation. In the heart of his book, Batchelor grapples with the force of culture and tradition for a European determined to become a Buddhist. He finds the salvific Christ a "consoling fiction," as he opens his book quoting Voltaire's estimate of history as a "convenient fiction." Buddhism, as its teachers show, depends on "transmission" from expert to learner; this chain can be tracked back in documented lineages to the historical Buddha. One cannot "grow up" in the practice, but must take it on actively. He cites an Hasidic tale of a rabbinical student going far to see how his chosen master ties his shoelaces. This sort of unexpected meeting, Batchelor explains, shows the type of unplanned teaching that characterizes true encounters. People want to pin down their version, their part of the elephant that they touch and see and smell. They miss the rest of the great beast beyond their grasp. Reification presents a danger. Attributing permanence, substance, and condition to that inherently changeable, evanescent, and dependent upon its components is the basic dharma that defining Buddhism resists. Batchelor stresses adaptation for the West, and for the East as its westernized; he reminds readers that any form of the dharma must be transformative, forced to change to a new environment for it to survive among its practitioners. This evolution happens in the culture as well as within the practitioner. "As long as the practitioner remains unaffected, the Dharma can be no more than a consolation, a diversion, a fascination or an obsession." (279) Later sections take us through various contemporary expounders of teachings. With "engaged" Buddhism, Batchelor finds an antidote for the pabulum often "soft-peddled" as dharma that panders to romantic, nihilistic, consumerist, or passive fads. Delving into the recently popular "interdependence" concept, he finds that Thich Nhat Hanh's "interbeing," developed out of the peaceful opposition that brought down the Catholic despot Diem in 1963, can topple oppressors. (Of course, I add, military might as wielded by the U.S. and its Vietnamese puppet regime insured that the non-violent alternative did not last long.) Globalization reminds us of interbeing in another context. The "'poisons' of the mind (delusion, greed and hatred) to be uprooted through Buddhist practice have become 'institutionalized' in the forms of the multinational corporations, consumerism, and the arms industry that increasingly dominate life on earth." (361-2) If one acts with true compassion, one cannot sit on a cushion all day. One must get out and take time to make changes to trouble the complacent and comfort the weak. Batchelor ends this book as he began, with the Dalai Lama being recognized by Vaclav Havel after the fall of Communism. Nearly twenty years on, reading his accounts, I wondered if any hope was left for Tibet, Burma, Vietnam, North Korea, or Laos where the "sangha" has been terrorized but where perhaps in a few redoubts monks, nuns, and laity try to rally opposition peacefully. He concludes with an telling and haunting anecdote from oral history conveyed firsthand that's missing from "convenient fictions" of the historical record. The Dalai Lama in his official autobiography "Freedom in Exile" omits his real encounter at the Wall of another East-West divide now broken by capitalism, migration, and global diaspora. He was on the East side, not the West as he writes. On that side, the GDR's Communist Party had fallen earlier that same day. The Stasi, the secret police, escorted him and his entourage into then-Soviet Zone at Checkpoint Charlie. A Citizen's Action Movement had rallied, wishing to take over East Germany to make it non-aligned, demilitarized, nuclear-free, and "environmentally aware." (376) This CAM told the Dalai Lama he'd be their "first official guest," and that Tibetan independence would be recognized. But, his handlers were nervous and got him back to the western side of the Wall. West Germans intervened, and reunification under the consumer oligarchy that epitomizes Western democracy in Europe followed for the GDR. Petra Kelly, Green Party leader, and her companion Gert Bastian told him this story. They were in the crowd that saw the Dalai Lama light his candle on the other side of the Berlin Wall. Petra had illicitly arranged the car that took the Tibetans to their clandestine (and heretofore unknown to Batchelor) roundtable. Four days after Kelly told this story, Gert fatally shot her and then himself. No suicide note, no explanation, at least of the New Year's Eve, 1992 completion of this book's manuscript. Out of such stories, multiplied in unpredictable, inspiring, and depressing fashion, history emerges into written form, and out of the scraps gleaned from past notes and testimonies, Batchelor

has created an engrossing story himself. (P.S. Readers wanting more about Shunryu Suzuki: see my 7-6-09 review of David Chadwick's "Crooked Cucumber." Also, see my review of Batchelor's "Buddhism Without Beliefs" 5-18-09.)

*The Awakening of the West* is an insightful and elegantly written history chronicling the developing relationship between Buddhism and Western culture. As anyone familiar with the work of Stephen Batchelor (best-selling author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*) would expect, *The Awakening of the West* is presented in a fresh and lively way and backed by thorough research. Using the innovative approach of starting with the present and working back in time, Batchelor makes it easy to connect familiar contemporary Buddhist teachers to their historical roots. He breathes life into history by capturing the personalities and times of famous and lesser-known but important Buddhist figures. After absorbing these stories and their context, readers will not only have a greater appreciation of Buddhism as a religion but can gain insights that can help them develop their own discerning wisdom. *The Awakening of the West* is a unique, engaging and important book for anyone seeking a greater understanding of Buddhism.

From *Library Journal* Unlike Rick Fields, whose *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Shambhala, 1992, 3d ed.) focuses on American Buddhism, ex-Buddhist monk Batchelor (*The Faith To Doubt*, LJ 2/1/90) examines a broader canvas, surveying 2000 years of Western history. He finds but a handful of Europeans who were directly impressed by Buddhism; only during the last 150 years did any tangible "awakening" occur. While erudite, Batchelor's coverage is diffuse and uneven. Thus, while his chapter on Russian Buddhism is a captivating study of Kalmucks, reincarnated lamas, Stalinist purges, and perestroika revival, his dismissal of theosophist Elena Blavatsky and painter Nicholas Roerich as "romantic fantasizers" is questionable. Urging Western modifications of Buddhist practice, Batchelor downplays the guru factor that produced an unbroken lineage from Gautama Buddha. Recommended for large collections only. Dara Eklund, Los Angeles P.L. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.