



BATCHELOR, Stephen. **After Buddhism**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

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After Buddhism is an attempt to synthesise the author's forty years of Buddhist study and practice in the Tibetan, Zen and Theravada traditions. Building on previous work in books such as *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1997), *Living with the Devil* (2004) and *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010), it seeks to develop a comprehensive response to the question: What does it mean to practice the Buddha's dharma today in the context of modernity and post-modernity?

The eleven chapters of the book alternate between critical readings of the core ideas of Buddhist thought as found in the earliest texts of the canon, and narrative accounts of five of the Buddha's inner circle of followers. This approach allows for the emergence of a thematic understanding of those teachings of the dharma that do not appear to be derived from the pre-existing context of Indian culture, while elaborating a portrait of the historical Buddha through his dialogues and interactions with key figures of his time and place in north-east India of the 5th century BCE.

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Central to this project is a radical and unorthodox interpretation of the foundational Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. On the basis of close textual analysis, the author argues that this doctrine may have originated as a series of tasks to be recognised, performed and accomplished rather than a set of truth-claims to be believed, understood and realised. From this perspective, the dharma is revealed as a task-based ethics rather than a truth-based metaphysics, thereby freeing it from the need to conform with any sectarian Buddhist orthodoxy. In recovering these earliest strata of Buddhist tradition, the author establishes a foundation from which to rethink the dharma in a language that address the concerns of our secular age.

In developing his thesis, the author offers extensive reflections on key Buddhist notions such as the five bundles (*kandha*), conditioned arising (*paticcasamuppada*), stream entry (*sotapatti*), mindful awareness, rebirth and karma, etc. By articulating a broad vision of Buddhist theory and practice, *After Buddhism* presents the dharma as a way of life that engages the whole of one's humanity. Such a practitioner aspires not only to engage with fundamental existential and religious questions, but to participate actively in the emergence of a contemporary culture of awakening.