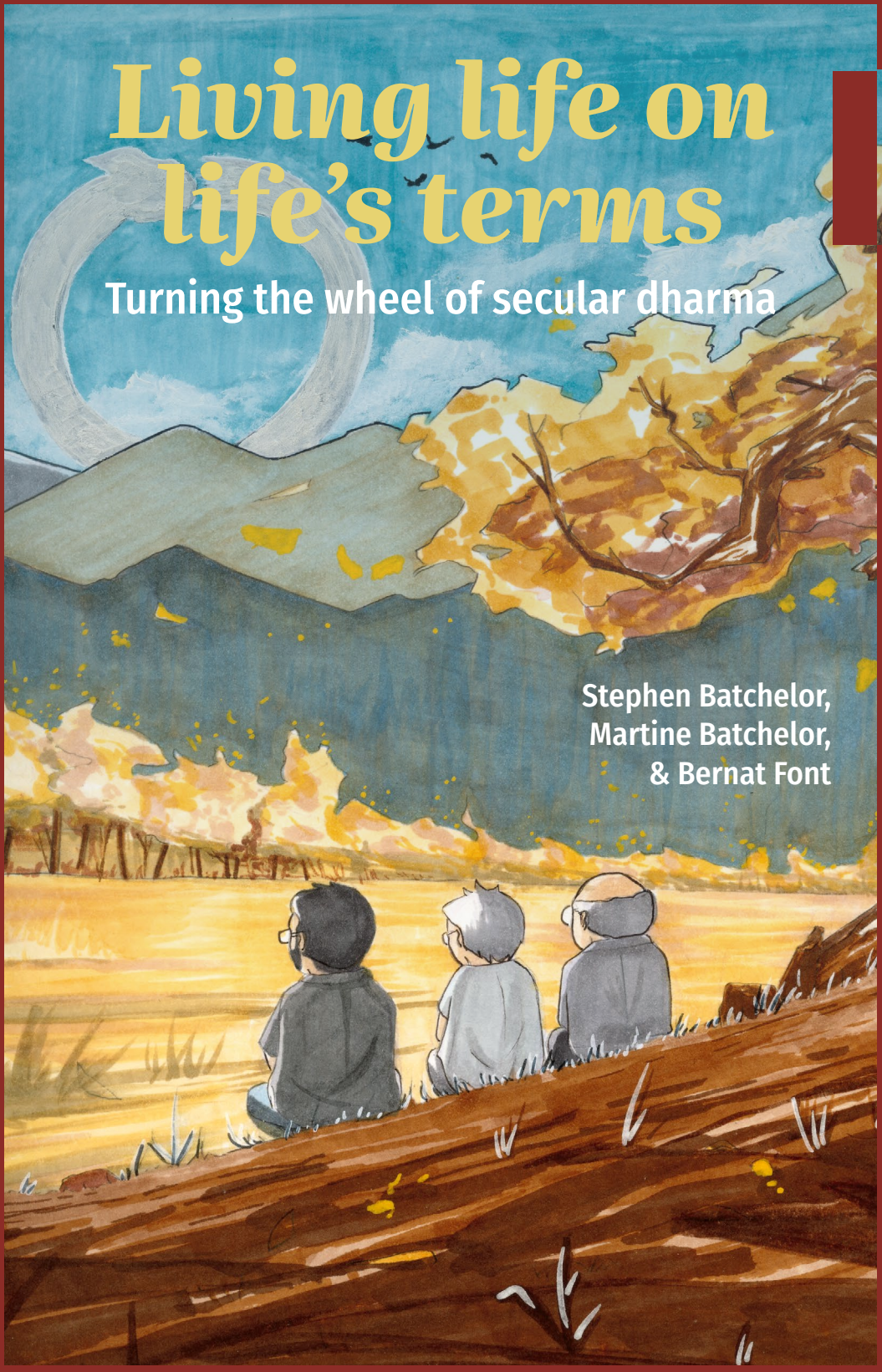
Living life on life's terms

Turning the wheel of secular dharma



Stephen Batchelor,
Martine Batchelor,
& Bernat Font

Identifying the core values and principles of the teachings of Gotama, the Buddha, *Living life on life's terms* systematically rethinks them in a way that addresses the issues of this secular age. 'What matters today?', the authors ask.

At the heart of this book is a reimagining of the Four Noble Truths. They are reframed as practical tasks to be performed – guidelines for living ethically and responding wisely to the realities of life.

This approach rests on a philosophical scepticism that values questions over answers. Following the Buddha's middle way between the extremes of 'it is' and 'it is not', secular dharma avoids dogmatic claims about ultimate truth or reality.

The measure of a teaching is simple. Does it help us live with greater awareness, care, and integrity? Does it free us from reactivity – the habits of clinging, resistance and denial that keep us trapped, harming ourselves and others?

The path of practice lies in cultivating attitudes, skills and virtues that ease these burdens, and open us to flourishing.

In this book, three leading voices bring secular dharma to life. Stephen Batchelor offers a tapestry of philosophical insight, Martine Batchelor shares practical guidance for weaving practice into daily life, while Bernat Font adds creativity and warmth through stories and metaphors. Together, their teaching creates a multidimensional experience that speaks to both heart and mind.

Drawn from a year long course at Bodhi College, *Living life on life's terms* is an inspiring guide for anyone seeking a contemporary path to freedom.

In a perfect storm rising mental health problems, especially amongst the young, ecological precarity, and geo-political shock waves Living Life on Life's Terms offers a mature and compelling vision of what it means to navigate this storm, and more than that, to flourish.

– **Willem Kuyken**, author of *Mindfulness for Life*

There is a timelessness to some of the deepest questions we share – how do we bring struggle, distress to an end, what skilful means can we apply in responding the the struggle and pain in the world? This book is a practical and insightful offering.

– **Christina Feldman**, author of *Mindfulness: ancient wisdom meets modern psychology*

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TUWHIRI
FINDING MEANING IN A DIFFICULT WORLD



Living life on life's terms

Turning the wheel of secular dharma

Stephen Batchelor
Martine Batchelor
Bernat Font

TUWHIRI
New York, Wellington, Sydney & UK



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Foreword

Cathryn Jacob

On a chilly November evening in 2021, I entered the towering doors of The Kairos Centre in Richmond, UK, nervously twiddling the small piece of plastic in my pocket from the negative lateral flow test which confirmed that I was not infected with COVID. The cold air and the weight of uncertainty hung around me as I stepped into the space, feeling both socially awkward and unsure of my decision to be there. To my relief, I was greeted warmly by two Catholic nuns at the reception desk, Mary and Mary Jo. Their kindness immediately eased my nerves. Mary escorted me to my room, a clean and comfortable though sparse space where I unpacked before wandering across the driveway to join the group for dinner.

Sitting between two strangers, I introduced myself while silently questioning my decision to attend this Bodhi College secular dharma course in the middle of a global pandemic. The programme consisted of four five-day modules at Kairos House, and a week-long Seon retreat at Sharpham House where – as I later discovered – Stephen and Martine Batchelor had once lived. The Kairos Centre is a large Catholic nunnery adorned with beautiful artwork along wide staircases and hallways. Meticulously maintained English gardens surround it. I found myself immediately enamoured with both the serene environment and the warmth of the nuns.

As we were chatting and getting to know one another, Martine

and Stephen entered the room. My breath caught momentarily. I had devoured their books and online courses, and attended a retreat led by Martine in Zagreb just before the pandemic. In every sense but name, I was a Batchelor 'groupie'.

Despite my initial star-struck awe, it didn't take long to see that Stephen was a gentle, kind, and humble man who carried himself with a grounded lightness, while Martine exuded a calm practicality that filled the space. Together, they created a teaching dynamic that felt balanced and deeply authentic, complementing one another's strengths.

Stephen and Martine were joined by Bernat Font, a student of Stephen who was completing his PhD in Buddhist studies and training as a dharma teacher. Bernat's fresh perspective added depth and nuance to the teachings, creating a dynamic interplay among the three facilitators.

That first evening, after dinner, we ascended a grand staircase to a large room with socially-distanced chairs arranged in a circle. I looked around at the small group of 16 participants, a number reduced by COVID restrictions, and felt an immediate sense of intimacy and connection. Stephen invited us to introduce ourselves and share why we had joined the course. When it was my turn, I heard myself saying: 'To learn to live life on life's terms.' I didn't yet realise how profoundly this experience would transform me, or how it would become the foundation for my spiritual growth and practice. What had begun as an ambivalent decision would soon become one of the pivotal moments of my life.

Over the following year, through the four modules, the Seon retreat, and regular group study sessions, our small cohort became a true sangha – a community of lifelong friends supporting one another on our journey. The lessons and practices I learned not only reshaped my approach to living with greater awareness and care, but also opened doors I had never imagined – including my

involvement in transcribing the talks that comprise this book, and joining Tuwhiri's editorial board.

Each day at Kairos, we followed a rhythm of early morning meditations, teachings, and reflective group discussions. Stephen's first talk left me in awe. With minimal notes, he spoke with masterful eloquence, weaving dharma teachings into a tapestry of insight and inspiration. Listening to him, I was watching a virtuoso at work, each word illuminating new depths of understanding.

Martine's teachings complemented Stephen's by offering practical guidance on integrating the dharma into daily life. Her sessions were imbued with compassion, and emphasised self-care and care for others. In the evenings, Bernat brought his own flavour to the teachings, often using personal anecdotes and creative metaphors to deepen our understanding. The interplay between the three teachers created a multidimensional experience that enriched every aspect of the course.

The week's teachings centred on the ELSA model, a framework of four tasks that guides one towards a life of greater clarity and care. ELSA is an acronym for the fourfold task – Embrace life (E), Let reactivity be (L), See reactivity stop (S) and Act to cultivate a path (A). Stephen introduced us to his Cartography of Care, a map that integrates 32 traditional dimensions of awakening – skills and virtues we can cultivate to navigate life with wisdom and compassion. These dimensions are not abstract concepts but practical tools for addressing life's challenges, fostering resilience, and embracing care as the foundation of a flourishing life.

The course emphasised the immediacy of embodied experience, drawing on natural patterns such as the seasons to illustrate the cyclical nature of the four tasks. For instance, embracing life mirrors summer's vitality, letting go reflects autumn's shedding, stopping corresponds to winter's stillness, and actualising the path evokes spring's renewal. This natural rhythm resonated deeply,

making it clear that awakening is not a destination but a continuous process rooted in the ebb and flow of life.

Central to the teachings was the concept of care as the unifying principle of the four tasks and the 32 dimensions. Through this commitment to care, we cultivate a life of meaning, connection, and growth.

Each module of the course was dedicated to one of the four tasks, with the three teachers collaborating to determine which aspects of the cartography of care would be most beneficial to explore for each task. While they worked together to shape the overall structure, each teacher brought their own unique approach, drawing from their diverse backgrounds and perspectives. At times, two or even all three teachers would explore the same topic from different angles, offering complementary insights. Occasionally, a teacher would introduce an additional topic they felt would enhance our understanding.

Stephen enriched his teachings with a wide-ranging exploration of ideas beyond traditional dharma sources. He drew upon examples from ancient Greece, philosophy, literature, and contemporary thought, weaving together insights from diverse cultures and historical periods. From classical philosophers to inspiring modern figures, his approach illustrated the timeless relevance of the dharma. His ability to connect Buddhist principles with a broader intellectual and cultural landscape made his sessions expansive and thought-provoking.

Martine brought a personal and very practical approach to the teachings. While she also drew from a variety of sources, her talks were infused with personal anecdotes, spanning from her years as a nun in Korea through to her modern-day experiences. Her unique gift lay in translating complex teachings into accessible, real-world application, offering concrete practices that we could integrate into daily life. With a warmth and care that resonated through her teach-

ing, she helped bring the dharma into the realm of lived experience, ensuring that the teachings were not just theoretical but truly embodied.

As the the course proceeded, Bernat was completing his PhD in Buddhist studies at Bristol University, and his engagement with Pali texts brought a rich and nuanced understanding to his teachings. He often introduced fresh perspectives that added new dimensions to the themes explored by Stephen and Martine. Like Martine, he wove personal stories into his talks, and his background as a jazz pianist also infused his teaching style with imagination and creativity. His sessions combined scholarly rigour with an artistic sensibility, bringing complex Buddhist concepts to life.



By the end of the course, I realised that I had not only learned to live on life's terms but had also found a deeper purpose in helping others do the same. The experience set me on a path of transformation and service that continues to unfold in ways I could never have anticipated.

I decided to transcribe the talks because I wanted to share the wisdom and insights I had gained from the course with people who had not had the opportunity to join us. It felt as though I had uncovered a mine full of precious gems – treasures that I believed could benefit others. Stephen introduced me to Ramsey Margolis from Tuwhiri, and I set out to transcribe all 50 talks. As you can imagine, this was an immense undertaking, requiring many hours of dedicated work. However, with each session that I transcribed, my understanding of the dharma deepened, and the teachings gradually became an embodied part of my life.

There is such profound wisdom in these talks that each

time I revisit them, I discover new insights and a richer understanding. Selecting just six from each teacher for publication in this book was a difficult challenge. In making my selection, I aimed to curate a collection that captured the essence of Stephen's fourfold task while ensuring that each talk could stand alone – read, understood, and appreciated in its own right. I sought out talks that approached the dharma from fresh, insightful, and thought-provoking perspectives. Ultimately, for the final selection, I have to admit that I also chose the talks that had most deeply inspired me – those I had personally enjoyed the most during the course.

We have included translations of the Pali terms used in the talks, along with the version of Stephen Batchelor's cartography of care that we worked with during the course. Because these chapters are transcripts from a programme taught some time ago, it seemed best to leave the terminology and the cartography as they were then, rather than retrofit them with later updates. Readers who are curious to see how Stephen's language and his cartography have continued to evolve will find this discussed in chapters 21, 27 and 28 of *Buddha, Socrates and Us*.



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Your willingness to show up during uncertain times, your lively curiosity and spirited discussions, and your ongoing care for one another – and for the teachers – gave this work its meaning. Your enthusiastic presence made the teachings lived rather than merely spoken.



Module 1
Embrace life



Introduction to Module 1

The first task: embrace life

Cathryn Jacob

'Embracing life is the first creative act – the willingness to be shaped by what we meet.'

To embrace life is to turn towards it – not selectively, not only when it pleases us, but with a willingness to meet what is here. This first task sets the ground for everything that follows. In Stephen Batchelor's cartography, it is linked with earth and summer: steadiness, warmth, ripening. Its colour is yellow – open, receptive – and its heart-practice is love: not romantic sentiment, but the quiet courage to let our experience matter.

This task invites a shift in how we understand mindfulness. Rather than a technique applied to stress or a tool for self-improvement, it becomes an orientation towards life itself – a way of inhabiting our days with curiosity and care. We begin with what is most immediate: the body we sit in, the tone of feeling in each moment, the atmosphere of mind, and the meaning that emerges in our speech and actions. These are not obstacles to navigate but terrain to live within.

The Four Resolves help shape this territory. They teach us to prevent harm where we can, to recognise and release what contracts us, to cultivate conditions that support well-being, and to sustain what strengthens us over time. These are not commandments but

movements – small adjustments in how we meet ourselves and others.

Alongside them sit the Four Steps of Creativity: aspiration (desire), perseverance (energy), intuition, and experimentation. They remind us that embracing life is not passive. It is an active, generative process – a form of participation. Something in us begins to lean in, even if only slightly at first. We start with aspiration, experiment with attention, listen for what is emerging, and slowly learn how to live differently.

The vow associated with this task – Beings are boundless; I will care for them all – is not a demand for heroic compassion. It is a directional statement. It points us toward a widening field of interest: the understanding that our practice is never solely for ourselves.

To embrace life is to recognise that the raw material for awakening is always present. It is in the tension in our shoulders, the fractured conversation over breakfast, the delight we scarcely notice, the ache we usually avoid. This task asks us to begin by showing up – feeling something, naming something, staying long enough to see what the world is asking of us.

Most importantly, we discover that our willingness to feel is itself transformative. To turn toward experience with tenderness, imagination, and attention is already the first movement of freedom. We start exactly where we are, and the work begins there.

✦ Chapter 1

Four foundations of mindfulness

Martine begins where the body quietly insists we start. Before we interpret, there is breath, pulse, posture, and the small flicker of feeling tone. She invites us to stay close to this simplicity, to let presence be felt rather than achieved. In her telling, mindfulness becomes an act of affection – attending to the living moment as though it mattered.

✦ Chapter 2

The four great efforts, or the four resolves

Here Martine unfolds the resolves not as instructions but as gestures – four movements of the heart that shape how we inhabit our experience. To prevent, release, cultivate, and sustain is to learn the grammar of care. She teaches resolve as creative permission rather than duty.

✦ Chapter 3

A democracy of the imagination

Stephen widens the horizon. He proposes that to embrace life is to create with it – to treat even suffering as material that can be worked. Desire, energy, intuition, and experimentation become tools for shaping reality. Creativity here is participation in the unfinished nature of being alive.

✦ Chapter 4

Creative awareness

Martine returns to show how creative awareness looks in practice: listening deeply, adjusting lightly, approaching each moment as a possibility. Awareness becomes responsiveness – tending life without tightening around it.

✦ Chapter 5

A jazz musician walks into a meditation room…

Bernat lets the metaphor sing. With jazz as his frame, he describes life as music partly composed and partly unfolding around us. Practice becomes attunement – the courage to respond without securing the outcome. In his telling, embracing life is the willingness to play.



Chapter 3

A democracy of the imagination

Stephen Batchelor

'A democracy of the imagination.' This is the title of an essay I wrote almost 30 years ago. I'm returning to it now to reconsider the main subject of that previous essay, namely, creativity. I aim to locate this basic human capacity within a framework I've been developing throughout the intervening decades, that of the Four Tasks – and in particular, the first of these tasks, *embracing lif*e. (In traditional Buddhist terms, that's comprehending *dukkha*, or suffering.)

What do I mean by 'embracing life'? First, I understand it to involve *mindfulness* – mindfulness in relation to our bodies, the physical world, our feelings, our tonality, and our mental states. And mindfulness in view of the operative frames, such as the five aggregates and the five hindrances, that provide contexts for sustaining and refining it.

But we need more than mindfulness to embrace life. The first task also requires motivation and resolve, and as a foundation for these, engaging in what I call *the practice of conditionality.* This means practicing mindfulness not only of the immediate circumstances of our lives in the world, but of their consequences. It means cultivating an awareness of how our present circumstances obstruct us and of how they can free us, of how they support or undermine a community or a society, and of how they reorganise our inner lives. I've come to recognise the practice of conditionality as an aspect not only of embracing life, but of the four tasks approached as a whole,

insofar as practicing the four tasks together creates the conditions for life's better possibilities to emerge.

So embracing life, and the practice of conditionality that supports it, are not standalone skills. They are intertwined with the second task, letting go of reactivity. 'Embracing' in this regard is necessarily nonreactive. To embrace is to say 'yes' to experiencing life mindfully, and this weakens the hold of reactive patterns. When we allow our reactive patterns just to be – when we let go of them – we create the conditions for reactivity to stop, whether momentarily or for longer periods.

This may all sound abstract and theoretical, but the four tasks are for the real world, in which we continually confront problems that challenge our resolve. When we're sitting in meditation and the mind starts chattering away, a lot of what it chatters about are the problems we've got, the hassles we face, the conflicts that life is putting in our path. This chattering itself can feel like a problem. We find ourselves going round and round, asking, 'How am I going to deal with this problem?' These may be real problems, of course. Our problems are not limited only to our inner obstacles, which tend to be emphasised in Buddhism – attachment, aversion, restlessness, lethargy, vacillation, and so on. Nor are they limited to our personal circumstances. They extend to how we live economically, organise our societies politically, and impact our environment and climate collectively.

It's all very well to be mindful of our problems, but that's not going to solve most of them. Nor will adding an extra measure of *resolve*. Something else is required, and that, I would argue, is creativity.

Creativity

It isn't just that the Buddha had deep insight into the nature of life, but that he was also able to imagine a new form of life. This reflects the creativity at the heart of his genius.

It's worth noting that the form of life the Buddha envisioned was rooted in the context of fifth century BCE India, a time of enormous social, political, economic and religious upheaval. The Buddha's teachings aimed to support those around him in meeting the challenges that such times present. What he imagined was consequently a way of seeing beyond the instability and tumult of his world, a way of living that went against this turbulent stream.

Thus, he didn't just recycle established traditions. He created a new way of understanding and of going about life in the world. A stock passage in early Buddhist texts declares, 'this is a teaching which has never been heard before'. We might dismiss this as religious rhetoric, but perhaps it's true. The example of the Buddha's teaching itself thus shows that the path beyond what frustrates us, paralyses us, or otherwise holds us back – and that leads towards our personal and collective flourishing – follows not only from practicing mindfulness and resolve, but from applying our creative imagination.

In this light, suffering is not a problem to be solved – to be 'eradicated', as tradition has it. Rather, it's a source of transformative power. It's to be embraced, and in the process, creatively transformed into a path, a way of life.

Art as a way of engaging with suffering

In our Western cultural tradition, the arts have long been a locus for creative engagement with suffering. We find examples at least as far back as the ancient Greeks. In our Western, post-Ancient Greek culture, the Christian artistic tradition has perhaps most powerfully engaged with suffering.

The role of the crucifix in this tradition epitomises this. Some of the greatest works of Western art involve a man nailed to a cross – hyperrealistically, in some depictions. If you go into a church in Mexico or Spain, it's all about blood, gore, and misery. It's very much in-your-face *dukkha*. In northern Europe, we're a little more coy.

Protestant churches, by comparison, are generally rather sanitised. Nonetheless, wherever one may stand in relation to Christianity as a whole, its elevation of pain and suffering into devotional art is striking.

I've long been inspired by an understanding expressed by JWN Sullivan, a popular writer on science and culture in England about a hundred years ago. Perhaps Sullivan's most famous book, a small volume published in 1927, was *Beethoven, his spiritual development*. It opens with the sentence:

> Few men have the capacity fully to realise suffering as one of the great structural lines of human life.

In Sullivan's framing, suffering is not just misery to be overcome. Rather, it constitutes one of the core elements that defines us, that structures us as human beings. Sullivan believed that this understanding was central to Beethoven's outlook. And Beethoven furthermore viewed suffering not only as a necessary condition of life, but also as possessing an illuminating power.

This may sound strange to a Buddhist ear. Traditional Buddhism tends to address suffering not in regard to its positive aspects, but rather as something to free ourselves from. In contrast, Sullivan's Beethoven shared my secular approach, whereby we choose to embrace suffering, not push it away. Nor do we choose to embrace it in *order* to push it away. We accept suffering for what it is, unconditionally – by which I mean unconditioned by greed, by hatred, or by confusion.

Great art offers myriad examples of such unflinching acceptance. Each of us can find examples of special personal significance. For me, these would include the late self-portraits of Rembrandt, in which he paints what he sees in the mirror as he gets older: an aging man who, as we now know, has gone bankrupt. Rembrandt had

needed to leave his fancy studio in Amsterdam. He was struggling. He was in a terrible state. In response to the challenges he faced, he just stares at the mirror and paints. A very beautiful Rembrandt self-portrait in this vein hangs in Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath in the north of London, as do several others in the National Gallery. They represent an extraordinary contemplation, a meditation on human suffering.

Another self-portrait I really love is by Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), a Japanese Zen master who composed in rapid brushstrokes. Like Rembrandt, Hakuin displays a poignant sense of grief and sorrow, along with puzzlement and confusion, all captured in his very quick lines. So we do find this contemplative practice in Buddhist tradition as well.

Some of us may be more moved by music – by the slow movements of a Schubert symphony, for instance, or of Beethoven's late string quartets and piano sonatas. Of the latter, Sullivan writes,

> These works have a serenity which contains within itself the deepest and most unforgettable sorrow. And yet a sorrow which is transformed by its inclusion in that serenity.

Such works are infused with a sense of tragedy, of loss, of grief. But what's striking in these examples is the beauty inspired by pain that they all share. Beauty and suffering are not at odds in these works. They come together.

An aesthetic practice

It's through embracing suffering, rather than evading, denying, or ignoring it, that the door to beauty opens. The serenity, equanimity, quietude, and tranquillity that we cultivate in meditation aim not at fostering a narrow, self-indulgent wellbeing, but rather at providing

the kind of space we need to embrace suffering. Dwelling in stillness, we can regard what might otherwise shock or horrify us, and say, 'Yes, this is the state of our existence'.

Once we've set aside some of that reactivity, what opens up is a sense of the miraculousness of the world, the wonder, the beauty. You may have noticed that when you are on retreat, when the mind gets still, the world comes alive. It becomes radiant. You've slowed down. You've stopped. You just look, listen, and hear. As you wander around the retreat center, you may be struck by the sheer beauty of the colour of leaves. Contemplative practice has renewed your awareness of the trees, flowers, and perhaps rabbits, which you may otherwise take for granted. Your stillness of mind has opened you to the sublime, in the original sense of something that inspires both wonder and unease. Indeed, there's something slightly terrifying about it.

Thus, contemplative or meditative experience is not just cognitive. It's not just about understanding things better. Nor is it just affective – about developing feelings of love, compassion, and joy. It's also aesthetic. It has to do with beauty. This haiku by the Japanese Zen monk Bashō captures this aspect of meditative experience:

> Departing spring
> Birds crying
> Tears in the eyes of fish

For me this brings to mind TS Eliot's notion of the sublime, as captured in his impression, in the 'Four Quartets', of 'an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing'.

The metaphor of the goldsmith

When we dig into some of the early texts of Buddhist tradition, we find this sensibility to the aesthetic to be an aspect of the path. One

discourse relates an encounter between Gotama, the Buddha, and a seeker named Pukkhusāti, in which the Buddha employs a metaphor that is relevant here. The metaphor illustrates the role of the aesthetic, and creativity more broadly, in spiritual development. Gotama says to Pukkhusāti:

> Imagine a goldsmith who has prepared a furnace of fire. He's heated his crucible, his little porcelain or enamel cup, and he's taken a piece of gold with his tongs and placed it inside the crucible. Sometimes he blows on it, sometimes he sprinkles water on the fire, and sometimes he just stands back and observes what's going on. In this way, … the gold becomes refined, rid of impurities, malleable and radiant, so that he can fashion from it whatever kind of ornament he likes.

With this metaphor of the goldsmith – a creative artisan – at work, the Buddha equips Pukkhusāti to engage creatively with the situations we meet in life. The Buddha points to a practice of awakening – a practice of human flourishing – that is far from a rote endeavor of resorting to mindfulness. It entails doing something with our minds and lives, and doing it skillfully. Like a master goldsmith employing her tools, materials, and know-how at the furnace, we can work at coordinating our equanimity, focus, and energy to transform the raw materials of our practice – the five aggregates of bodies, feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and consciousness. Through this creative practice of the dharma, we can imagine and then become the kind of person that we aspire to be – just as the goldsmith shapes purified gold into whatever kind of ornament she wishes.



Chapter 4

Creative awareness

Martine Batchelor

The subject of creativity is close to my heart. I coined the terms creative awareness and creative engagement mainly because as I practiced and as I taught people, it seemed that this was what we were doing. It was not just about being aware. Rather, we were developing what I like to describe as a creative awareness, which is a responsive awareness, not simply being like a mirror. I felt we were in fact developing a dynamic awareness.

I once tried to get these terms certified. I wrote a short email to Bhikkhu Anālayo, who is a great scholar. I respect him a lot, and use his texts. I asked Bhikkhu Anālayo in that email, 'Don't you think that sammā sati could be translated as creative awareness?' I got an email back. 'No, it's not in the text!' At least I now knew it was not in the text, as such. I decided it was still a good idea because it seems to speak to people, and was relevant to my experience.

Let's go back to the question. What is this creative awareness and how does it come about?

Anchoring and exploring

I'd like to describe *samatha* and *vipassanā* as anchoring and exploring. When meditating we are cultivating these two things: anchoring and exploring and, as such we are cultivating brightness and calmness. But what we are in fact developing is a creative awareness which

has the two qualities of being bright at the same time as being calm.

So the calmness does not stop the brightness, and the brightness doesn't stop the calmness. These two factors contribute to each other. Then I realised that what is special about creative awareness is that it has two components in the way we experience it, in the way we integrate it: acceptance and transformation.

But here again, I would say creative acceptance, because acceptance is often seen as resignation, when actually for me acceptance is equivalent to the slogan which is in Pali, *Yathaa bhuutam nyana dassana* – 'to see and know things as they come to be'. This is generally translated as 'to be with things as they are', but to 'be with things as they are' is not dynamic. The Pali term actually means 'to see and know thing as they come to be'. Now, there is some dynamism in this because it's basically saying, 'Be alive, be present to what occurs'. Why is it so important to be seeing and knowing?

A lot of the time, we quickly move from experiencing to describing. From describing we move to what I call association. We do this especially with suffering. If we experience pain now and it has an unpleasant tonality, then we have this amazing ability to associate it with past tonality, which might have very little to do with what's going on now. Or future tonality, which again might not have much to do with what's going on now.

In terms of embracing life, there is creative movement in what's going on. Can I be really present to it? Creative acceptance is seeing what is going on and being with it 100 percent. I found it interesting when Bernat was telling us about his teacher in Burma, U Tejaniya, who says that we need to be aware from when we wake up to when we go to bed. In Korea, they tell us to question at night too; they are a little more extreme. If in Korea it is day and night, at least with U Tejaniya you can sleep.

The problem is that we link awareness with judgement. This is because when we are told to be mindful, immediately we think

that we don't just need to be aware but that we also need to judge it. If somebody tells us to be aware from we wake up to when we go to bed, we interpret this as, 'I must be judging myself and others for twelve solid hours'. This is really stressful and causes a lot of anxiety. Awareness is not about judgement. Rather it's about discernment.

The magic of mindfulness

'What happens when we are 100 percent aware?' We can do this when we walk. We go for a walk in the mountain, by the sea, on a beautiful path, and the intention is to be aware, to enjoy, to benefit, from the place we are walking in. We can notice at times that we are 100 percent aware, and that's where the magic happens. Suddenly, the blue is more blue and the red is more red, and, 'Ah, it's so beautiful!'. But as soon as you think about what happened yesterday, or you ask yourself, 'What am I doing tomorrow?' you're still seeing, you're not falling off the path, you're still going in the right direction but the colour become more opaque.

Then there is the movement of coming back – to the sea, to the flowers – and it's like magic. The blue is more blue, the red is more red. So we're not asked to judge 100 percent all the time, which would be really stressful. But we are asked to be present to what's going on in a fully present way. Generally, we look backwards at the past, or forward to the future, and exist only a little bit in the present moment, which makes things more opaque. The magic of mindfulness is in the realisation, 'Oh, this is beautiful'.

Sometimes people write to me through my website. One day, I got an email from this person telling me, 'I don't want to disturb you but I'm doing meditation. I've listened to some of your talks and I would like some feedback', and he wondered if I would be interested in his little book of haiku. I replied, 'Of course'.

He explained to me that he had been very depressed, and had thought meditation could help him with it. Then he heard about

haiku – three-line poems found in the Japanese tradition – and he had thought that maybe instead of just sitting, feeling heavy and dark, perhaps he could go into nature, really observe nature, and write haiku about it. This became his practice. Every day, he would go outside for 30 minutes and write haiku. He told me that it had a magical quality because suddenly he was less oppressed by his suffering, he was able to see more of life in all its aspects, and see himself as interconnected to it.

He was no longer thinking about himself as much and was opening up to the elements. He still had some sadness, some difficulties, but he did not feel so alone. Through his poems, he connected to nature, then connected to other people who wrote haiku, then connected to people who did meditation, and so on. I thought that was so sweet. This is the magic of being 100 percent present.

We can't be fully aware all the time because we are taken over by many different things. Creative awareness, however, has an acceptance within it which helps us see what is going on, what is beautiful, and how we can be nurtured by what is beautiful. Also, we see what is painful, what is difficult, and how it is difficult.

Creative awareness and transformation

For example, let's take anger, which is something I know very well. I've improved a lot, but I used to get very angry. I used to be easily irritated until, one day, I had a heated discussion with a Buddhist person … and it's always tricky having a tiff with another Buddhist meditator. Anyway, we did not agree, and I went to my work, cutting up carrots to be cooked. Suddenly, I noticed that I was cutting my carrots very angrily, and I thought that was a little dangerous.

Then something within me, which I will call creative awareness, made me look at the body. What I was experiencing in the body was that I was shaking, and that this was painful. Then I realised that I was doing this to myself. Nobody was doing this to me. 'I'm doing

this, the pain of the body shaking, this is me doing it.' As soon as I saw, 'I'm doing it,' I thought, 'What's the point?' Well, it just went.

If the power of the creative awareness is strong, if you inhabit 100 percent awareness, then you really know how it feels. Because a lot of the time what we tend to do is to go into the description, or into judgement, but the magic of mindfulness is instead to ask, 'How does it really feel?'. Anger, for example, and then through that understanding, leading on to the creative engagement.

Let's look at something else: fear. I was very afraid of the dark. I think it's very common to be afraid of the dark, probably more common in women. I had always been afraid of the dark until one time, when I was in Korea, we decided to do a no-sleep week of meditation. This is something we did in that tradition in December before the day of the Buddha's awakening. The idea was that we would sit all day and sit all night, and do that for seven days. Personally, I was not worried about sitting, but I was worried about going to the toilet outside at night – one o'clock, two o'clock... I thought, 'Oh la la, this is going to be tough.'

I went to the master and asked, 'What can I do? I'm so afraid at night of the dark.' He said, 'Do the questioning. Ask "What is this?" Just do that.' So, I assumed this was going to be like a talisman, a protection. It would protect me from the bad guy out there. We start to sit, and then night-time arrives, and at about one o'clock, I go to the toilet outside. 'What is this? What is this? What is this?'. And the second night, 'What is this? What is this? What is this?'. And then on the third night, I go out. 'What is this? What is this? What is this?'

I could really feel the fear, my heart was shaking, but at the same time, asking 'What is this? What is this? What is this?' Suddenly, creative awareness popped up and said, 'Who would know that you are here, in the middle of nowhere, and come and get you anyway?' After that, I was much less afraid.

But it's the realisation, 'How does it feel?' and 'What is it I am

telling myself?'. The creative awareness is asking you the question, 'Does it correspond to reality?'. If there really was a guy out there, yes, I needed to do something, but if there was no-one, why am I frightening myself unnecessarily? So there is this aspect of transformation, and an aspect of acceptance.

Creative awareness and acceptance

Acceptance is knowing what is going on. It's not resignation, but actually a combination of seeing, knowing, and experiencing. It's as if you put the full light on it, and you really feel it. You know it, you feel it, you experience it. It's the 100 percent experience, like when we are walking and see the colour of the flower 100 percent. With creative awareness what we realise is that, at times, we have to accept, and in this acceptance there is transformation. It is true that at times just accepting something actually transforms it, but we have to be careful that it's not only that, since acceptance is only one part of it.

Creative awareness and conditionality

Another part, and this is what the four resolves are about, is conditionality. If things are conditional, I can do something about it. So acceptance is one condition, when there is nothing else you can do. We had a friend who was dying of cancer in a hospice. Stephen and I went to see him regularly. That's when I realised we cannot transform anything here, we cannot do anything here. He receives medically-strong painkillers, but the only thing we can do is to be here in a peaceful and kind way. We cannot change anything.

However, because we cannot change anything, this does not mean that we cannot be here with wisdom and compassion. There are situations which cannot be changed, and situations which we can transform, in which there can be transformation. Because a lot of the time we are stuck in repetition, being creative can result in something new happening.

Creative awareness and courage – *vīrya*

One of the qualities Stephen points out in the four bases of creativity is *vīrya*. This could be understood as courage. To transform something we need a certain courage. In order to see the situation, it is essential to see if there is suffering.

Enrobing

Why did I become a nun at the age of 22? I was a French woman in Korea in the 1970s when nobody knew about Buddhism in Korea. It was because I had been on a bus travelling from a beautiful town in Nepal to Kathmandu. This was one of the most beautiful drives you can imagine. It's amazing, with steep cliffs and huge mountains. It lasted about eight hours or more. I am on this bus and the countryside is beautiful, but for the whole journey I am thinking about money. 'I only have $100 left, so what am I going to do?' My mind was so preoccupied with my finances that I did not see anything, and this memory of not seeing the beauty around me because I was so preoccupied really stayed with me.

Following this event, I had various travelling adventures in India and Thailand and I ended up in Korea, where I decided to become a nun. The other reason I became a nun was because one time when I was resting at work, a Korean woman of about 40 or 50 asked me questions like, 'Are you married?', 'Do you have children?', 'Are you studying?', 'Are you working?'. I said no to all of them. You would have thought that the Korean woman would think I was a 'good for nothing' person. No. She said, 'Wow, you are in such a great situation. If I were you, I would become a nun. There is nothing stopping you from doing that.'

She must have hoped she could have become a nun at my age, Then I thought, 'Yeah, why not?' Then the thought arose, 'Do I want to repeat the same suffering?' For three years, I had lived very freely, and yet I kept experiencing the same suffering. I kept getting



Chapter 5

A jazz musician walks into a meditation room...

Bernat Font

Our lives can meander into territories we wouldn't have expected. While I'm now a dharma teacher, for a decade I was a professional jazz pianist and composer. That was how I earned a living. I had never consciously connected these two activities before, so on reflection I was the first to be surprised at how much came out.

There are a lot of similarities between what I do now and what I did as a jazz pianist. So much so that a friend of mine believes I haven't changed anything: I just do another type of gig now – meditation gigs.

Creativity in jazz

When we practice an artistic discipline, we are constantly responding to changing conditions. In a live music performance, we have to be creative all the time because we're playing for different audiences. We may have prepared a list of what we want to play that night, but after a couple of songs we realise that some things are not going to work with that audience, or they don't suit the venue or the sound conditions.

While musicians typically bring their instruments with them, I played whatever piano was found at the venue, not the one I practiced on at home. And every piano is a little different, so I had to adapt. Like me, all the band members had to be aware of the differ-

ent conditions and respond to them, rather than follow an agreed plan, such as the setlist for the night or how they personally wanted to play. One needs to be responsive and since, as you know, in jazz there is a lot of improvisation, one has to respond constantly to what the other musicians are playing.

In the TV series 'Downton Abbey', there's an episode set in the 1920s in which a jazz band is invited to play at the house. At some point, the dowager countess, played by Maggie Smith, asks someone: 'I wonder if any of them knows what the others are playing?' While jazz is sometimes mocked in this way, it's actually the very opposite: a musician will not play well if they are not listening to what the others are playing.

For a few years, I taught at a music school for adults who wanted to learn blues and jazz. The school had a very hands-on philosophy. We tried to get students to play in groups as soon as they were able to play something, as this helped them to learn how to be in a band. Often, I would stop an ensemble in the middle of a rehearsal and ask the saxophone player, 'What was the guitarist doing?', or 'Who made a mistake with the harmony?'.

If they were too focused on what they themselves were playing, they wouldn't know how to answer. One of the first things a jazz musician needs to learn is to be as attentive to what the others are doing as to your own playing. You cannot pretend you are playing on your own, you cannot be self-centred and self-absorbed.

Sometimes a musician will play with complete strangers. We may have met them ten minutes before the show, and suddenly we're making music together. Or we might perform pieces of music we don't know. I might be told, 'Well, the harmony is kind of like that other tune, but it has a different thing in the F in the middle of the piece.' So I would say 'Okay', and find out as we began playing.

You cannot stick rigidly to a script and then complain that, 'Oh, it's not supposed to go like this, they shouldn't be playing that'

and get annoyed, You never know how the piece is going to unfold. As Martine said earlier, you have to always start by accepting what is happening at that moment. Perhaps, the drummer and the bass player look at each other and decide to make what is called a 'break', where they stop playing. Then you find yourself without anyone backing you up for a couple of bars, and you have to do something with it. Ideally they warn you, but if they don't – or you're lost in your own world when they do – you need to respond swiftly.

In accepting what is going on and respon;ding to it, we transform the situation and in this way affect what others will play too. Jazz involves a lot of experimentation, not only within our own playing, but even more crucially, in our interaction with other musicians.

Creativity and experimentation

One of the four *iddhipādas* – which Stephen translates as 'bases of *creativity*' – is *vīmaṃsā*. The related verb means 'to consider, to examine, to find out, to investigate, to test'. In other words, to experiment, to try things out. Our life and the world we're in is just like a jazz concert: we never know what other people are going to play. In a changing and uncertain world, creativity becomes inevitable, because we can neither plan nor simply stick to a script. There's no choice: we have to be creative, make choices, try things out and see what happens.

Music students in particular find out very early on that music is the art of time. Since it happens with time, a mistake cannot be *undone*. If a painter makes a wrong stroke on the canvas, there might be a way to correct it. In music, we have *already* played the wrong note. If a news presenter slurs their speech, they can repeat it correctly straight away. A musician can't even do that, and that includes when they're performing solo. We don't have the option to pause or to go back, so we always need to move on from the mistake.

Neither is it always an option to avoid mistakes. Because we live in a changing and uncertain world, creativity requires that we

give up the fantasy of certainty and instead embrace mistakes. We can never know the outcome of our choices. We can try our best to get reliable information and reflect, but we can never be sure. Time and again, we have to try things out and see what happens.

The pressure to be perfect, however, can weigh heavily on us. We don't *want* to make mistakes. Particularly as meditators, we may complain about what we've done or how we're feeling: we think it's not how we *should* be feeling after all these years of practice. 'I *shouldn't* be getting so annoyed', or 'I *should not* have had such a meditation', and so on. When we do this, we are forgetting the necessity to accept the way things are, something without which dharma practice isn't possible.

In that moment of lament, we are living from an *effect* mentality. We judge ourselves by what we think *should be* the outcome of however many years of practice, instead of seeing that particular moment as a moment *to* practice, and engaging with it creatively.

The confidence to embrace mistakes

The list of the five hindrances ends in doubt, particularly of the paralysing kind. But more than indecision, this hindrance is about a lack of confidence and trust. For in this unpredictable world, not being sure what to do makes a lot of sense, and if we wait to have all the information or hope to find *the* definitive answer, our feet will sink deeper and deeper in the quicksand of the fifth hindrance and we may die in the waiting.

Yet, if we think of this as lack of confidence, the practice becomes trusting the process, and trusting that if I make a mistake, I will be able to acknowledge it and change something, to the degree that is possible. While I cannot escape mistakes, I *can* trust that I will *recognise* them and hopefully learn from that. Entering the stream – the first level of awakening – entails being perfected in ethical conduct. But when you check the texts for what this means,

they describe not the absence of ethical faults but an ethical attitude of caring about it. This entails recognising a mistake as such, and setting an intention to do things differently in the future.

Of course, we resist because mistakes often bring suffering. Here is where things get tricky. If my mistake impacts someone else and I feel bad about it, this comes from a good place, it means I empathise; and despite its unpleasantness, healthy regret has a function. I certainly don't aspire to be indifferent about harming someone. I also don't want to go to the other extreme and suffer disproportionately for having erred, torturing myself for something so utterly human. There is a real danger to be quite unforgiving to ourselves a lot of the time.

So there's a healthy recognition of a mistake, and a certain degree of *dukkha* which we embrace. So I would say that to embrace mistakes is part of being creative, of experimenting, and of the first task as a whole – embracing life.

Playing with creativity

I have a tendency to think about the teachings a lot: structuring them, making charts and re-articulating them so as to digest them and come up with something which is my own understanding of those teachings.

I realise that not everyone I practice with has this sort of obsession, and on reflection it probably comes from my education as a jazz performer, where even if you are very influenced by certain musicians, you are expected to find your own style and not play exactly the same way as others. Perhaps your way is not that different from someone else's. It doesn't have to be. You don't need to come up with something completely different. Still, we get used to trying to do things our own way in jazz, and that's the way I've always practised the dharma: trying to play it my way.

I suggest and encourage you to try to make the teachings your

About the authors

Stephen Batchelor (*right*) is a translator, teacher, artist and writer who is known for his secular approach to the dharma. A co-founder of Bodhi College, his books include *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, *Living with the Devil*, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, *After Buddhism* and *The Art of Solitude*. His most recent publication, *Buddha, Socrates and Us*, was published by Yale University Press in 2025. A co-author with



his wife Martine of *What is this? Ancient questions for modern minds*, he lives in southwest France.
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Martine Batchelor (*centre*) teaches meditation retreats worldwide and lives in southwest France. Recently she has been involved with the Silver Santé Study, teaching meditation, mindfulness and compassion to seniors in France to see if this could prevent ageing decline. Martine is the author of *Meditation for Life*, *The Path of Compassion*, *Women in Korean Zen* and *Let Go: A Buddhist Guide to Breaking Free of Habits*. Her latest works are the *The Spirit of the Buddha*, and the forthcoming *Feeling, flourishing and secular dharma*. With her husband Stephen, she is a co-author of *What is this? Ancient questions for modern minds*.
https://martinebatchelor.org

Bernat Font (*left*) teaches with a combination of scholarly rigour, everyday examples, and a playful sensibility. He met the dharma at a very early age, and has been mainly influenced by Stephen Batchelor, Sayadaw U Tejaniya and the Thai Forest tradition. A founder of Espai Sati[https://espaisati.org] in Barcelona, he has a PhD in Buddhist Studies, translates Pali texts into Catalan and Spanish, and is also a jazz pianist. He is the author of *Early Buddhist Hedonism: The role of spiritual pleasure in the Pali discourses*.
https://dharma.cat



About Bodhi College

Bodhi College was founded by Stephen Batchelor, Christina Feldman, John Peacock and Akincano Weber to provide courses offering an in-depth exploration of early Buddhist teachings for today's practitioners. The inspiration of the College has its roots in the teachings (dharma) that are found in the earliest Buddhist texts. These teachings underpin a range of contemporary styles of meditation, such as mindfulness and vipassanā.

Welcome to all

Bodhi College holds courses and retreats in beautiful venues across Europe as well as online, committed to making the exploration of the practices and teachings of Gotama – the man we know as the Buddha – relevant and accessible in today's world. The College welcomes people of every age, ethnicity, cultural heritage and religious background, socioeconomic group, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity. Encouraging critical scholarship and bringing a modern sensitivity to exploring the Buddha's early teachings, the college does not subscribe to a particular doctrine, and is not aligned with a specific Buddhist school.

Carefully crafted courses by experienced teachers

Bodhi College offers a practical application of the teachings that will enable students to integrate dharma values into all aspects of their daily lives. As meditation teachers, mindfulness trainers, psychotherapists, philosophers, academics, movement practitioners and more, teachers bring a wealth of varied experience into the courses they create and teach. Since each teacher offers their own contemplative approach, all courses are unique.

Learning for experienced practitioners and beginners

Bodhi College runs courses for both the experienced practitioner and those who are simply interested in the teachings and keen to learn more. Many mindfulness teachers study with the college, and they offer a range of retreats which satisfy the EAMBA (European Association for Mindfulness Based Approaches) criteria for mindfulness teachers' annual retreats. Courses include extended programmes that run for up to two years and weeklong retreats as well as weekend, full day and half day seminars.

Core faculty

Martine Batchelor, Christina Feldman, Bernat Font, Christoph Köck, Yuka Nakamura, John Peacock, Jaya Rudgard, Antonia Sumbundu and Akincano Weber make up the faculty of Bodhi College. They are responsible for designing and planning the curriculum, teaching courses and modules, mentoring students, training prospective teachers, and inviting visiting faculty to contribute to the programme.

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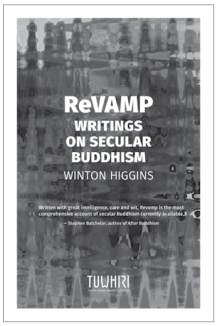

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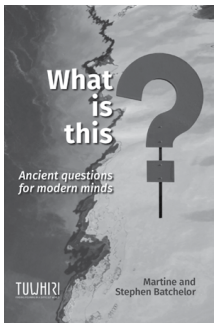

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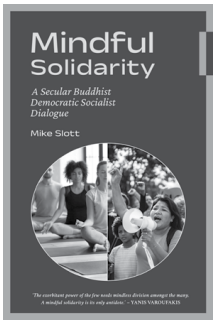

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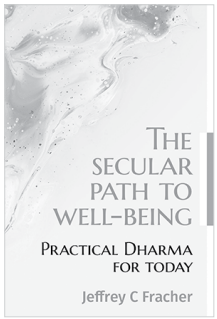

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