

BOOK REVIEWS

These reviews are offered to inform readers of the various reactions of Sangha members to books on spiritual practice. We hope they can illuminate a path toward awakening for us all.

BREATH BY BREATH

The book I'm reviewing is called *Breath by Breath, The liberation Practice of Insight Meditation*, by Larry Rosenberg, published by Shambala. Larry is a founding teacher of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center in Massachusetts. I have attended several of his retreats at IMS in Barre, MA., and he is a very personable teacher. This book is suitable for a beginning or more advanced meditator.

It is a commentary on the *Anapanasati Sutta*, a major teaching of the Buddha. *Anapanasati* means "mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out". The teaching shows how to use the breath awareness to steady attention while examining the arising and passing away of sensations in the body, feelings, mental states and the cultivating of wisdom. This is a progressive process, with one skillful awareness building toward the next.

Here is a quote from the book: "If we can learn to allow the breath to unfold naturally, without tampering with it, then in time we may be able to do that with other aspects of our experience: we might learn to let the feelings be, let the mind be. We do a great deal more controlling of the mind, because we're afraid of what might turn up. But it is through letting the mind be that we eventually learn how to relax and let go into freedom...". The author guides us through the stages of breath awareness with expertise and wit. It is an easy read and very informative. *Submitted by Peter Carlson*

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER

This review focuses on "Journey to the Center-a Meditation Workbook" by Matthew Flickstein, published by Wisdom in 1998. I know Matt, and I think he has some unique skills as a teacher. He is trained as a psychotherapist and spent a major part of his career providing skills training for institutions and individuals interested in increasing production. In addition to being a professional trainer, he is also a primary student of Bhante Gunaratana, who is a very well respected teacher from Sri Lanka who has lived and taught in the U.S. for over 25 years. This workbook is helpful for beginners and more experienced meditators because it includes exercises for practical applications of the principles of Buddhism. For instance, he suggests a journal format for answering some questions that are important to discover: "How much of your life do you spend dwelling on the past or the future?...How much of your life do you spend looking forward to being somewhere else?" This book provides a structured, gradual approach to practicing Buddhist meditation that may be very useful for those of us who are helped by such devices. *Submitted by Peter Carlson*

BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS

In this concise book Stephen Batchelor, a former monk in the Zen and Tibetan traditions, presents an existential and agnostic interpretation of Buddhism that is provocative, well thought out and lucid. Those seeking to learn or be reminded of the

precepts of Buddhism will welcome Batchelor's unambiguous and compelling writing. Written in simple terms, Batchelor reminds us that the Buddha's most important legacy was to teach a way of being as opposed to something to believe in. Batchelor observes that "*there is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about this path*". It is a way of life that encompasses everything in its constant state of flux. "*The four ennobling truths are not propositions to believe; they are challenges to act*" that lay the ethical groundwork for living authentically.

Batchelor demystifies the Buddha, noting that he was not a mystic but a healer who presented "*his truth in the form of a medical diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment*". He also demystifies enlightenment or awakening, noting that it has come to be viewed as a mystical experience and progressively more inaccessible. We are reminded that our dharma practice must be integrated in our everyday life and that "*a culture of awakening can never be a private affair. Such a culture is always an expression of community*". Dharma practice is embodied in friendships. Our practice is nourished, sustained and challenged through relationships with others. Yes, we are born and die alone, but Batchelor wisely states that "*we are participatory beings who inhabit a participatory reality, seeking relationships that enhance our sense of what it means to be alive*". Dharma practice has survived through friendships that date all the way to the Buddha himself.

One of the significant aspects of this seemingly simple book is that Batchelor courageously questions how Buddhism has evolved in contemporary societies. Batchelor purports that Buddhism has lost its agnostic edge as it has become institutionalized. As the dharma spread, ideas that were the cornerstones of ancient India became hardened into dogmas. Batchelor observes that "*dharma practice has become a creed much in the same way scientific method has degraded into the creed of Scientism*". As Buddhism has become mired in religiosity and conformity, its agnostic and inquisitive nature has become replaced with rigidity and intolerance of dissent. Buddhism is experiential and does not require that we look at the dharma for hard and fast answers on the nature of life and other esoteric issues. It does not begin with "*belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world*". Dharma practice requires us to be present and have "*the courage to confront what it means to be human*".

Batchelor also bravely examines whether to be a Buddhist one must accept precepts such as the doctrine of rebirth. He concludes that we must not be compelled to either accept or reject it and may simply determine that we do not know or haven't determined our views on this. Ultimately, ascertaining whether death is followed by a rebirth will not change our existential angst.

Institutions have fostered the meditative and philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism but Batchelor questions whether they can support a contemporary culture of awakening while safeguarding individual freedom. Can institutions entrenched in conformity create a more awakened and compassionate society that tolerates dissent and welcomes diversity? Only time will tell. *Submitted by Lillian Perez*