



## WHY A NEW BUDDHA WAY?

2007 Statement by NBW founder Geoffrey Hunt

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### 1 BUDDHA WITHOUT BUDDHISM?

1.1 It is still early days in the growth of the Buddha's practices in the Western world. The West has misunderstood a great deal about the Buddha's practices. It seems many people already know what 'Buddhism' is without ever having really looked at it, let alone tried to practise it. We still hear things said like 'Buddhists are atheists', 'Buddhism is a middle-class philosophy', 'Buddhists believe in strange things like rebirth', 'Meditation is about stopping your thinking', 'Buddhism is just another fad', 'Buddhism is a pessimistic outlook', 'It undermines any ambition or dream you may have', 'Buddhists believe that ultimately there is nothing', 'Buddhism is a self-indulgent self-centredness', 'Buddhism is a withdrawal from the world'. All of these are false.

To begin with, 'Buddhism' as an 'ism' is a Western invention, an attempt to squeeze a group of practices and an understanding of life into a belief system, ideology, philosophy or psychology. Closer to its origins people speak instead of 'Buddha sāsana', or literally, 'the teaching of the awakened one'. So, this Manual is not inviting or persuading anyone to 'become a Buddhist'. It is suggesting that if you feel an enduring deep-down sense of dissatisfaction with life then certain practices may help with that, bringing the kind of peace of mind that can only come with insight into the realities of life and what you are. This is obviously not about providing you with techniques for satisfying one's desires. Less obviously, it is not about *eliminating* the setbacks and calamities of life, but *reorienting* oneself to them, and even deploying them in aid of a deeper kind of peace and understanding.

1.2 Meanwhile, in the Eastern world those same practices have to a large extent, but not entirely, become rather fossilized in institutional, dogmatic, ritualistic and even superstitious forms. Sometimes these practices have degenerated and are merely paid lip-service to, and in some cases have disappeared. It will be many years, involving the efforts of many people, before the Buddha's liberating practices will be re-founded in the context and assumptions of the modern world, in which 'West' and 'East' no longer matter as far as those practices are concerned. It is quite possible that an understanding of those practices will throw new light on the teachings and lives of other great spiritual leaders.

A key issue for a new Buddha way is that of 'karma' (kamma) and letting go of the metaphysical 'merit system' in which I supposedly earn a superior place in a future life by being good or, in its most corrupt version, of handing over money to the institutional custodians of 'Buddhism' like indulgences in medieval Christianity.

When the Buddha teaches about what we do in everyday life, in his own language, he speaks about *karma* (*kamma*). It is just an ordinary word in his language, used in ordinary contexts. It means 'action', although it has now been widely misunderstood. In truth there is no doctrine of 'Karma' that you have to believe in order to follow the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha was not interested in philosophical theories or metaphysical beliefs. He said so many times himself, and also said that he had no secret teaching. As far as he was concerned what he had to teach could be discovered by people for themselves, if only they would look hard enough, sincerely enough and in the right way.

However, one thing does need to be said about our individual action, which should be obvious, but which we have forgotten in our contemporary culture, and which the currently confused notion of 'karma' does dimly reflect. While it would be helpful to let go of any clinging to the metaphysical view of 'karma' as some kind of personal return after death, there is something vital we need to understand. That is, my every action on something or someone is intrinsically and *at once* an action on myself. If 'karma' has any meaning at all then it is that and only that; that is its spiritual meaning.

We can all see this if we wish, but usually pay no attention to it. There is a vivid saying in the Buddha's teachings that getting angry with a person is like picking up a burning coal with one's bare hand to throw at that person. When I am *directing* anger towards you I am *suffering* anger. I have made this feeling my own. If I had a choice would I take ownership of such a thing? I have taken hold of anger like I might take hold of a hot coal. Not very wise. The intended destruction, which may or may not result, is at once and necessarily a self-destruction. This is especially clear if my anger has no impact on you. I am left feeling the discomfort, even the pain, of the anger. I may feel foolish, regretful or even more angry. I have attached to this arising feeling which is here and now endarkening my life. This is not a *consequence* of the anger, it *is* the anger. I repeat: It is the anger itself.

1.3 So, could there be (or, is there already growing) a new Buddha way, a *Navayana*, one which engages with the current and dominant manifestations of our assumptions about the human condition and the 'good life'? Many are beginning to perceive that these assumptions - consumerism, never-ending technological solutions, mastery over nature, individual freedoms with minimal obligations or commitments - have led us into a dead end, and a dangerous one for the survival of human civilization.

The crisis that our world now faces on every front – cultural and philosophical, economic and environmental, political and social, moral and ethical – will no doubt have the effect of deepening fear and hatred, religious fundamentalism, populism and authoritarianism at the same time that it will push many people in the opposite direction and into a re-evaluation of the possibilities of open-hearted understanding of the reality of the whole human family.

The time is right for a fresh approach, one that maps the Buddha's way onto the *best* of the 'Western outlook'. Those of us brought up in the West do not have to try to be Tibetan or Japanese or Thai in order to adopt the Buddha's practices. Those of us in the East (India, Japan, China and other countries) do not have to reject the Buddha's practices simply because we reject so much of the painful past. Those practices do not in their essential message belong to the past, despite appearances. They transcend any culture and any historical period and can fit into the new as easily as they fitted into traditional cultures. In many ways those practices may *more* easily fit with some of the most liberating contours of 'Western civilization', while challenging those 'Western' contours that are leading the world to catastrophe.

What liberating contours? Those of openness and transparency, self-awareness, accountability and accessibility, equality and freedom of conscience, a spirit of negotiation and participation, and a questioning and critical attitude that seeks to get to the root of things.

The conditions for a new growth of the Buddha's teaching could perhaps be encapsulated in six guiding principles. A new Buddha way must be practice-based, accessible, well-founded, participatory, engaged and real. The conception of a New Buddha Way is guided by these, and is open and receptive to its community of teachers and learners. We may now consider these principles more carefully one at a time.

## 2 PRACTICE-BASED

2.1 New Buddha Way is not founded on beliefs (religious, philosophical, customary, historical, etc.), but on actual practices, and the inquiry and questioning that follows from such practices. These practices are inward as well as outward, and emphasize the former only to re-establish a human balance that can lead to the awakening of no inner/outer.

By a 'belief' I roughly mean a thought that something or other is questionably true, for example, that John is a good person or that Mars has no liquid water (which at present seems likely). It seems to me that recent decades have seen a quickening in the decline of religions from their spiritual insights and practices into an adherence to a set of 'naturalistic' beliefs and institutions.

I say this not to reject religion, but to abandon what it has on the whole become. In the West many now wrongly think that attitudes and behaviour generally rest on beliefs, overlooking the fact that it is usually the other way around. A new Buddha way does not ask anyone *to begin by believing* anything. This is not agnosticism or suspended belief, and it is not a matter of 'not believing anything'. It is simply a *different kind of approach* entirely. The new followers of the Buddha's teachings are not agnostics, not nihilists and not even sceptics.

By a 'practice' in general I mean attitudes and behaviours. And, in speaking of the Buddha's 'practices', I am more narrowly speaking of the observation and potential redirection of my inner experience of thoughts and beliefs, sensations and feelings, attitudes and behaviours. It also includes the light this throws on other individuals and my relationship with others. For example, observing my experience of my own pleasures and pains, expectations and disappointments. Then, I gradually move on to much deeper aspects of my experience of being conscious, being human, being alive, 'being here' and even 'not being here'.

2.2 This shift from beliefs to practices is crucial in the age we now live in. Most importantly, if in trying to understand each other we begin with our beliefs we are certainly going to get into disagreements and arguments and this often leads to feelings of suspicion, hostility or even violence. If I want to find common ground I may try to persuade you that my belief is true or better. If you hear that I am a 'Buddhist', you may ask me 'What do Buddhists *believe*?'. Then, you listen and accept or reject. This is not a helpful approach. In fact, it is a hindrance. It is not a matter of being a 'Buddhist' or of believing this or that. Instead it is a matter of knowing how to look into yourself with some seriousness and determination to understand how you 'work', and uncover what you are in a deep sense.

What you may find there is your own distinctive mixture of the *same* human ingredients that make up every one of the seven billion or so humans on the planet. You can disagree with me about my beliefs (maybe, after all, there is some hidden liquid water on Mars!) but you cannot disagree with me about *my awareness of my experience*. If I am aware

that I am becoming angry, for example, then there is no room for disagreement, that is simply 'what is going on in me'. You might *believe* that a practice of developing the ability to be aware in such a way is a waste of time, of course. In that case, *your belief* might be getting in the way of responding to my invitation to try *doing* the same as I am.

You do not have to. That is what practitioners of the Buddha's way do in such circumstances. They don't try to *persuade* someone to adopt a belief; they *invite* them to join them in a practice. An invitation can always be turned down - no problem. Obviously, if you invite someone to dinner you are giving them an option, not imposing anything on them (usually). An invitation to dinner has little or nothing to do with beliefs. Imagine you invite someone to dinner and he asks, 'Do you believe in broccoli?' Or, 'Do you believe in dinner?'

Of course, 'believing *in*' is not the same as 'believing *that*'. They often get confused. 'I believe *in* my friends' means that I have some trust, or faith or confidence in them. In this sense too, you cannot begin the Buddha's practice if you do not have at least a glimmer of confidence that it *might* work for you.

### 3. ACCESSIBLE

3.1 New Buddha Way is an open invitation to anyone and everyone. You only need be human (or a sentient being) to qualify.

The New Buddha Way aspires to grow as a lay movement. That is, it is not specifically addressed to monks and nuns. It is not addressed specifically to intellectuals and people who can read dead languages (Sanskrit, Pāli, archaic Tibetan, etc.), although these languages are very interesting in many ways. If there's anything hidden that needs to be revealed then it is not to be found in a dead language but where you are hiding it in yourself.

There are some in the West who believe (or appear to believe) that the Buddha's teachings are only, or principally, to be found through some affiliation with and emulation of *the culture* of Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, China, Japan or somewhere else in the 'East'. Well, they are invited to this practice too. The people of those countries or regions are also welcome. It might be refreshing to let go of 'Buddhism', that is, the Buddha's practice turned into a set of beliefs and institutions, and return to the practice itself in the context of our actual contemporary lives.

Of course, a new Buddha way cannot be independent of culture as such, no more than any other human activity can be. For example, it is hopefully developing in England (among other places), and in the form of NBW. That's where the founder of NBW and his friends *happen* to live. NBW, is an 'experiment' in accessibility that aspires to develop in English at the moment, and in ordinary English, although this language has no special privileges. It just *happens* to be rather common and useful at the present time, like Latin was at one time, or Chinese may be in the future.

3.2 NBW is not a *group* strictly speaking, since it has no boundary, no inside/outside. Sometimes individuals turn up asking about 'joining', but one cannot join in the club sense of 'join', because there is nothing to join. What you *can* do is follow the practices and take strength and lessons from others doing the same.

What is going on at an NBW session is an anchor for the practice and not a 'group' to be joined or a 'service' or ceremony to be a spectator at. Meditation and related practices are focussed in NBW sessions, but are meaningless if not taken into the ordinary life of each participant.

Anyone who has travelled the world knows that there are some broad differences in the assumptions, attitudes, relations and practices of peoples. The Buddha's practice of peace and insight may look strange and difficult to understand to people in my culture if it is all tied up in a completely different culture. It has always been tied up with *some* culture or another, and has always adapted and been adapted; it couldn't be otherwise. Now is the time for this practice to engage with the everyday culture of people in the streets of London, Paris, Frankfurt, Madrid, Rome, Stockholm, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo and elsewhere. And not only in the cities, but anywhere at all.

#### 4. WELL-FOUNDED

4.1 If we are going to follow some life-changing practice, we need some confidence that it is tried and tested, well-established and authentic. That is not enough, because it has actually to work for us, but it is a reasonable requirement. In the case of the Buddha's teachings we are fortunate to have a body of core teachings on how to practise (not on what to believe but on how to practise) that go back to his time. Since these teachings are about 2,500 years old it is not surprising that they have been interpreted, embellished and expanded by many of their followers. The result is a huge body of written works in many different languages, such as Indian languages, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese. However, the Buddha had many followers over his 45 years of teaching in (what is now) India and Nepal and they appear to have done a good job of getting together to remember and recite what he said. After he died other followers wrote down the basics and, naturally, started introducing their own interpretations and embellishments, some of it alien to the Buddha's way. Over a period of time, as with all spiritual explorations, the pointers to an awakening direction were given a literal meaning and officially ratified.

We are lucky that one collection of these earliest writings has survived almost intact and as a whole. It is the *Tipiṭaka* (meaning 'Three Baskets') which has been carefully maintained and protected by one line of his followers known as the *Theravāda* (The Elders). This line is still to be found in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, for example. Another ancient version exists in a Chinese line of followers. As one might expect, there have been all kinds of developments, commentaries and disagreements about this *Tipiṭaka*, and in fact there are literalisms, inconsistencies, obscurities, lots of repetitions and not a few absurdities in it. As the teachings spread from India northwards it changed its character into a more popular form known as *Mahāyāna*, the 'great vehicle' for all people. In Tibet, in particular, it absorbed all kinds of beliefs and practices that cannot be found in the Buddha's teachings.

All this does not matter that much for someone wishing to practise nowadays. You don't *have* to study anything, but you do need teachers. If anyone does choose to study the *Tipiṭaka* intensively, then after a while they would almost certainly see clearly what the coherent and consistent core of the teaching is. Literalistic interpretations and alien interpolations would be the greatest snare, however. For the most part, the basis of the *Tipiṭaka* is neither a story about the Buddha nor about a nation or ethnic group and its trials and tribulations. It is about how *you do* the practices of peace and insight in order to ease the stress and suffering embedded in being alive, in living. That is the message of the *Tipiṭaka*.

4.2 So you are not asked to believe that the Buddha was anyone other than an exceptionally gifted spiritual teacher. His ordinary name was Siddhārtha Gautama (Siddhattha Gotama) and he was also known as Shakyamuni (meaning the wise man of the Shakya clan) and as 'the Buddha' (meaning 'the one who is fully awake'). He was not the only authentic spiritual

teacher, before, at the time, or after. Many others were and are pointing in the same general direction. If, for example, one engages with the teachings *of* Jesus rather than the institutionalised story *about* Jesus, one will find many striking parallels.

What the teachings make clear is that you too can be wise and fully awake. The burdens of deep dissatisfaction can be lifted. You can re-orientate yourself. But you do need to make a persistent effort – admittedly, not particularly easy in this busy consumerist age.

So a New Buddha Way would be based, as far as is possible, on a single, simple, coherent and consistent practice squeezed from the core teachings of the Buddha. NBW attempts to get these teachings across to anyone and everyone. It is not interested in arguing with scholars about origins and interpretations, for its ultimate test of validity is whether it goes some way to bringing the Buddha's fundamental teaching into everyday life now. We won't know unless we try it together.

The question of whether the Buddha's teachings are well-founded, then, is not really about the validity of an ancient compilation of books at all, but about what we find out about ourselves by ourselves. The books *might* help.

## 5. PARTICIPATORY

5.1 We may summarise the teachings of the Buddha in one word: Dharma (or, Dhamma). This means several things: the *teachings* on insight into the truths and limitations of human life, and this *insight* itself, and these ultimate *truths* themselves. This is because to understand the teachings is not like grasping knowledge of arithmetic or plumbing or astronomy. The teachings really become teachings only when recognised and accepted into someone's life, and recognising them is itself to have insight, and the insight is a 'realisation' (reality finding itself in the individual, so to speak). So 'Dharma' stands for all three at once: the teaching, the accepting and the truth or reality.

This might seem peculiar at first, but it is very ordinary. We can more easily grasp it perhaps with a parable (below). The point I am coming to is that it is because the Dharma is this way that teaching and learning the Dharma *has to be participatory*, a shared practice of and between people. It is not a piece of knowledge held by one person, a kind of super-human, to be handed over to others who receive it passively.

### 5.2 The Taste of Broccoli:

Janet very much likes the taste of broccoli. She tells her friend Fiona about it. Fiona has never tasted broccoli, so how does Janet describe or explain it? Firstly, she tries to compare the taste of broccoli to something else that Fiona is familiar with: cabbage and cauliflower. 'Broccoli is rather like cauliflower, but stronger, a bit like cabbage and...'. Fiona is now a little nearer to the taste of broccoli, but what she has is the thought or image of broccoli not the *taste* of broccoli.

Fiona persists with her questions about broccoli. Later, Janet gets hold of some broccoli, cooks it, invites Fiona over to dinner and serves it to her. Fiona tastes it; now she's got it. 'And how does it taste?' asks Janet. 'Well... I can't describe it, but it's good!'

Fiona had never tasted broccoli, so how could Janet describe it to her? In fact, she cannot do so fully or directly. She can do one of two things. One is to compare the taste of broccoli to something else that Fiona is familiar with, like cauliflower. In matters of spiritual or existential insight teachers might find themselves adopting that approach: 'What is the

Kingdom of God like?’ Jesus was asked. ‘It is like a mustard seed,’ he replied, ‘and it grows and grows, into a tree, and even birds can lodge in it’.

The difficulty with this way of teaching is that the listener has to see through the analogy (or metaphor, symbol, parable, ritual) to what it ‘stands for’ or indicates. And they have to do so by themselves. But what it points at is precisely what they have not seen before, so they might or might not be able to do that. It is a wonder that metaphors and parables ever work, but they often do, of course. Art and poetry depend on them. So there is the danger of misunderstanding: the listener might take it literally. It depends on whether they are able to discern the difference as well as the similarity between metaphor and the ‘thing indicated’. Literalism (connected with ‘fundamentalism’) causes a lot of difficulty and disagreement between us. People and groups have even killed each other because of it, sometimes on a large scale, and sometimes even within the same religion.

The second way is to *do* something: to go and get some broccoli and invite Fiona to taste it. This requires effort on the part of the giver and the taker, the teacher and the learner. Very often we are not prepared to make any effort, partly because it takes us outside our ‘comfort zone’. ‘I’m happy with cabbage’, says Fiona, ‘Why should I try this foreign-sounding broccoli-thing of yours?’

5.3 Now, to come back to my point about the *Dharma*: how can it be the teaching, the learning and the thing taught at the same time? Well, think of the taste of broccoli. The actually experienced taste (the reality) of the broccoli is the only authentic teaching – the one that is bound to be effective under normal circumstances, especially when all words fail. And where is this taste-experience? It is ‘in’ the learner; the person doing the tasting. At the precise point of tasting, it *is* the learner.

You may have noticed here that taste is a metaphor for insight, that which you attain through the Buddha’s practice. As I said, the trouble with any metaphor is that either you get it or you do not. There are no guarantees. But the Buddha’s practice offers many metaphors (and parables), many practices, many pointers and devices for attaining insight – most importantly, it is something you work through with other followers of the way. So, there are infinite opportunities for ‘getting it’, sooner or later.

5.4 Now my second point. Why is the *Dharma* necessarily participatory (a relationship between people), rather than a handing-over of a piece of knowledge? To return to the parable: this whole broccoli-rigmarole was something going on between Janet and Fiona. Janet could talk as much as she liked *about* broccoli – she might even fill a multi-volume book about it, *The World Encyclopedia of Broccoli* – but still the taste of broccoli would be the real issue and talking or writing about that does not help, or does not help decisively. What would we make of someone who set themselves up as a leading broccoli consultant and expert witness, but had never tasted broccoli? Janet’s analogies with cauliflower and cabbage might help to point Fiona in the right direction, but in the end they had to sit down to dinner together. Eating the broccoli together, Janet winked, a big smile came over their faces: the mutual joy of broccoli! No words were necessary.

To be honest, as far as broccoli is concerned one can take it or leave it. No mutual joy is certain in this case. (It’s a remarkable fact, but people have been known to dislike broccoli.) But when it comes to the *Dharma*, it’s another matter. To taste the *Dharma* is at once no longer to be oneself, but to be any and every human being, and even every creature, every thing. I cannot accept humility by myself, but only in relation to others, and this applies to all of us.

5.5 Thus the Dharma is something we can only cultivate together. When we divide ourselves up into factions, hierarchies and authorities we lose it. You might say it is the mutual understanding and striving of the human race. You already have what you need to awaken yourself - you just forgot where you put it because together we have hidden it. Finding it is necessarily a community effort.

Participation is organic and free, and if flowing in the same general direction, it is immensely creative. It does not mean that anything goes, for there needs to be a flow to it, not mere turbulence. Unfortunately, this flow once it emerges, may gradually crystallise, like a huge glacier grinding down everything in its path. This happens in the form of some authority-based religious institutions.

Then, some melting pools and subterranean springs can be very refreshing.

## 6. ENGAGED

6.1 Since it is necessarily an effort of human community, there can be no question of withdrawing from ordinary human life. The lessons to be learned are embedded in the human life that we have here and now. Undeniably, it can be a liberating step to withdraw oneself from the business of ordinary life completely for a period. The Buddha did so, and other great spiritual leaders did so. Countless others have found some degree of awakening by doing so, and continue to do so. Retreats are very beneficial, and there is no particular reason why every human being on the planet should not go on one at least once in their lifetime.

But retreats aside, we have to look honestly at ourselves, as we actually live from day to day, and do so together. Not as we have lived in the past, not as we wish to live in the future, but as we are actually living at this moment. The truth about ourselves does not primarily lie in history books, sociology treatises, psychology manuals and TV documentaries about the workings of the brain. It lies in what you said or did not say to your partner or next door neighbour this morning, what you chose for breakfast, what you thought and felt in the minutes and hours of today, what you do for a living, what you bought or did not buy, what made you laugh, your wants, irritation, fantasies, pleasant surprises, fears, worries, tiredness and doubts.

All the things that people think, believe, feel, and do day by day all around the world add up to the world we live in. *That's what the world is made of.* We may be mystified by what scientists tell us about tiny negative particles of matter, but we still have little understanding of the gross negative reactions and attitudes we humans have, or even what they are. Scientists may mystify us with their latest talk of 'dark energy', but the dark energy of our ignorance is already destroying us. Negative reactions and dark attitudes have killed and distressed many more humans and other life-forms than negative nuclear particles. Our concern should first be ethical, and then technological. The Buddha and other spiritual teachers have always understood this. But somewhere in the blinding glare of technological progress and mass consumption a dark shadow has fallen over our ethical nature, over our deeper need to live in peace and understanding with each other. A menacing cloud of cleverness obscures the light of wisdom.

6.2 When we follow the Buddha's teachings by trying to do what he suggests, we shall almost certainly find that our attitude to all kinds of things around us will gradually change. This is not primarily because our 'beliefs' have been changed, but because we have come to see things in a new way and live in a new way. Our relatives and friends, our food, our homes,



what we do for a living, our outlook on questions of environment, economics and politics all begin to take on a different meaning. *How* exactly, once again, is not easy to say. We are back to the taste of broccoli. If we try to express it in words it would be something like this: we feel more peaceful, gentle, understanding, accepting and braver about everything going on around us, and this is because we are coming to see ourselves differently. And this is a different kind of 'difference'.

If my self-centredness is being dissolved then it follows that I want less, I reject less, and feel more at peace. Furthermore, if my self-centredness is weakened then I am more receptive and sensitive to what is going on around me. Since I am not the only important thing around, I notice the uniqueness and value in other things I might not have noticed before, and I am more inquisitive, respectful and accepting. In a curious way, while everything is seen to be unique, at the same time everything is connected too. The uniqueness is woven and interwoven into ever-shifting patterns.

6.3 I might now ask myself why I had never noticed all this before. The answer is because I was filled up with *my* thoughts, *my* feelings, *my* sensations, *my* body: I, me, mine. Where I was once preoccupied with myself, I am now becoming open to everyone and everything. I am, with others, engaging with the world in ways I could not have imagined. I may have thought I was engaged with it before – but that was to a large extent my *clinging* to what I wanted or did not want from the world, my craving for more of something (pleasurable, etc.) or less of something (painful, etc.).

Dharma practice, then, is certainly about withdrawing from self-centred engagement with the world, to re-engage with the world selflessly (or less self-centredly). The Buddha's practice is not just about sitting on a cushion meditating, but about our human life together. In the practice, we are *disengaging* from war on ourselves and on nature, and engaging with what is necessary for peace, wisdom and sustainability.

Life cannot be affirmed from where we are right now, but only re-affirmed once we have re-oriented ourselves. With a global spiritual reorientation we would be in a well-founded position to provide clean water for all, food for all, education for all, care for all, artistic creativity and celebration for all. We have the material means to do these things now, but we do not do so because ethically and spiritually we do not know how.

## **7. BACK TO REALITY**

7.1 When we face crises on all fronts it is a sure sign that our old ways of thinking have become dislocated from the realities of our lives. Nothing seems to make sense, and no obvious way forward can be envisioned. We may fall back into denial, cynicism or, much worse, become fearful and angry and seek someone to blame. In this situation it is vital to examine and challenge our way of thinking at its roots.

An individualistic, pleasure-seeking and consumerist ideology has now spread across the world, setting fires in every corner, from California to China, from the Antarctic to Amazonia. Ignorantly, we have poisoned the air, the oceans and all living things. And we are ill-equipped; none of the viewpoints we have depended on for so long now seem to help us. There is surely something very inadequate in our broad views on the most important things: our moral and ethical values, the role of science and technology, our religions, our families and friendships, our way of life. Many of us know that something is very wrong, and feel disoriented, but have no clear idea of how to make any headway. There is a strong temptation

to fall back on what helped us in the past, without thinking that this may make things worse, not better.

Maybe what we have to do is put everything aside and start again. Is it possible to do this? Is it possible *not* to do this, if a climate catastrophe tears up the book of human history? Where would we begin? Would it be a matter of finding a completely new beginning in understanding our 'human nature'? Or, would it rather be a matter of relocating beginnings that had already been made and partially accumulated in human history and then misunderstood or lost? Have we really understood those who delved deeply into human nature, tried to tell us what we are and how to rise above it, and warned us of the consequences of remaining in ignorance?

7.2 All the great spiritual teachers over the millennia have told us, in one way or another, in different languages and with different imagery, that we are strongly inclined to be self-centred, blinkered, clinging and craving creatures, and that (as useful to short-term 'biological survival' as it may have been) this inclination is ultimately self-destructive and does not do justice to our potential. They have told us at the same time that there is a way to mellow and soften this inclination. The strange thing is that while on the whole the human race has accepted that this is true it has done one of two things. It has shrugged its shoulders and gone on as before, or it has gradually turned the recognition of this truth into yet another form of self-centred clinging (institutional religion, for the most part, as we know it today).

Perhaps our best hope is in a return to the core truth of these teachers in an open-minded and inquisitive spirit. By that, I mean making our best effort to understand the core truths, while cutting away from our minds all the subsequent encrustations of excuses, compromises, embellishments, misunderstandings and inconsistencies. It might be like cutting back a tired and tangled garden, only to find that the following spring pure white snowdrops appear that one did not even know were there all along.

*Peace in yourself, peace in the world: a new Buddha way.*

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