

BREAKING THE SILENCE, CHANGING THE STORY: Buddhism versus neoliberalism



(Painting of Vajrayogini in the form of Naropa's dakini)

'The softest thing on earth overtakes the hardest thing on earth' Daodejing

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Introduction

"The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge in mankind and greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA. Thank you very much."

In the film Wall Street (1987), the businessman Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) is implying that his own obvious greed is a virtue. It's the smart and ruthless who will thrive, and this ultimately makes for a better world. It's a wonderful speech, well-written and performed, and Gordon Gekko wins the day.

But, despite his name, Gordon Gekko is not a caricature. He is a convincing portrayal of a powerful man, and of what many people really believe. In him we see not just the pseudo-honesty of the bad guy in an amusing film, but the neoliberal ideology which rules our world. This ideology is extremely influential through a few simple ideas and assumptions. The mainstream media, business leaders and politicians repeat these ideas so often that they begin to seem like reality. 'Get out of the way of business. Shrink the State, destroy the Welfare State, let the market decide. There is no such thing as society – only individuals. For the economy to be healthy, we must unleash the aggressive creativity of the entrepreneur. In the short term the weak may suffer, but ultimately this will be better for everyone. On the other hand, perhaps we just need to leave the poor behind anyway, since they

probably brought their poverty on themselves. The natural world needs no looking after – it is an infinite resource to be exploited’.

Neoliberalism began as a version of classical economics formulated by academics in the 1950s and 60s. But it quickly became much more: a worldview, an ideology, a view of human nature, almost a religion with its own myths. Postwar up to the 1980s there was a broad centre ground of politics, in Europe and North America at least, which was the social democratic ideal. Left and right wing politicians disagreed on means, but broadly agreed on humanistic values – that basic education and healthcare should be available to everyone, for example. But since the 1980s, with the rise of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA, and with the growth of global corporations - neoliberal ideology has become hugely influential around the world.

Despite being so important, neoliberalism isn't often talked about. There's no Neoliberal Party, and I don't know of any politicians who would like to be described as neoliberal. What started out as an economic theory has come to seem just the way the world is, and the political centre-ground has changed accordingly. In this new world, human beings are naturally self-interested and competitive, we must let business have its way or the economy will suffer. Lip-service is paid to looking after the poor and vulnerable, and perhaps doing something about climate change and the environment - but we must balance the national budget first. Ideals are OK in their place, but the adults know we must live in the real world, and accommodate to economic reality. And the reality to which we must accommodate is that the rich will continue to get much richer, at the expense of the poor.

Investigating neoliberalism reveals a great deal about our contemporary reality, and begins to give answers to such questions as: why is there such huge and increasing economic inequality, both globally and within wealthy countries? How has business taken control of politics? How have we managed to do so very little about preventing climate change, or mitigating its effects? How have we come to the rather scary rise of right wing authoritarianism and racism in Europe and the USA?

You might be finding the title of this book puzzling. It might seem, what with social media and communications technology, that the modern world is full of noise, and

that silence is in short supply. But there is an important silence which is extremely influential all over the world - the neoliberal silence. One of neoliberalism's cleverest moves was to avoid becoming known as an idea. Ideas with names can be debated. Even today, many people aren't sure what the word means. Neoliberal ideology is in fact so prevalent as to be invisible. It is what's referred to as 'economic reality', or 'the real world'. Greed and consumption are good, 'free' markets will ultimately be better for everyone, economies can and must grow endlessly. This is just how the world actually works, and there are no real alternatives. Politicians who challenge this orthodoxy in favour of a more compassionate society, or a more realistic relationship with the natural world, are dismissed as infantile - or simply ignored. Part of the neoliberal silence is not giving space to dissent or ethical perspectives.

At the same time, the polar ice caps are melting much faster than the scientists had predicted¹, and it's beginning to look like preventing runaway climate change might no longer be possible². Global greenhouse gas emissions are still rising, and that rise shows little sign of going into reverse³. The massive spike in greenhouse gas emissions which was the main trigger for climate change originated with the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, in the globally-wealthy countries. The corresponding huge increase in economic activity, supported by a similar increase in burning fossil fuels, brought great benefits to those countries. But these countries, on the whole, are taking very little responsibility for their historical or present-day contribution to climate change. If anything, they seem firmly wedded to the neoliberal economic and political worldview which pays lip-service to tackling climate change. In actual practice, they are almost entirely intent on business as usual.

For example, if there is to be any chance of avoiding runaway climate change, almost all the world's remaining fossil fuels need to stay in the ground⁴. But around the world, the fossil fuel corporations are showing few signs of slowing down. They are exploiting riskier and more ecologically-harmful fossil fuel sources, building infrastructure designed to service extraction for decades to come⁵. And in many other ways, such as loss of biodiversity, rainforest destruction and ocean acidification - we are stressing the living systems of our planet (the biosphere).

As a species, we urgently need to reduce our negative impact on the biosphere, and become more resilient to what's coming our way. That means greatly decreasing our resource use, radically changing the way we live, how we see the world and how we co-operate with each other. It's hard to see how all that can be achieved within a worldview that has no real concern for human suffering or the natural world, that prioritises the freedom of business to make as much profit as it can, that is locked into endless economic growth fuelled by increasing consumerism and consumption of natural resources. It's unfortunate that this neoliberal worldview has become so dominant at this point in our history.

All this is painful and scary to look at, and our natural tendency is to look away. But it's very much looking like climate change is already happening, and will be happening in our own lifetimes, rather than in future generations. There are signs of the sorts of positive changes needed emerging globally – but they need much more popular support than they are so far getting. So we can no longer look away. We need to find ways of holding all this that allow us to relate creatively to it. We need a positive vision: which prioritises love and compassion, through which we find deeper fulfilment by connecting with each other and the natural world.

And I believe there are grounds for hope. Despite neoliberalism's dominance in global culture, it is just one story amongst many stories: about human nature, how we relate to one another and to the natural world. Neoliberalism also has stories about human history and development, how we came to be the way it says we are. And of course, stories are important because what we tell ourselves is what we become - whether individually or collectively. We have at least to some extent internalised these stories, or accepted them unconsciously – and we need to examine them. Neoliberalism itself has a deeply unconscious shadow side, which is whispering to us that, in the face of climate change, we aren't in fact worth saving. But our conditioning is so complex: we don't fully know who we really are as a species. For example, international and local responses to humanitarian disasters are sometimes amazingly positive and compassionate – showing that we aren't just atomised zombie consumers, that compassion and love are certainly not dead. If we hold to humanist, spiritual or Buddhist values, we need to do more to call out neoliberalism, to break its spell, to name it as just a story - to challenge its manifestations in our lives and in our society.

So where am I coming from personally, in relation to all this? I'm writing during a four-month solitary retreat at the Ecodharma centre in Catalunya, Northern Spain. It's summer. I'm living in a beautiful timber cabin in its own little wood, high up on a steep valley side, looking out over a huge view. The ground is very rocky and stony, but there are many trees, bushes, tiny flowers, gorse. Many different birds and their calls, including a cuckoo. I see buzzards and vultures gliding above cliffs nearby. I've been visited by deer, pigs, hares, lizards, red squirrels, bats, mice, owls and one mean-looking adder. In the distance: forested hills, many cliffs and strange stone formations, ridges, fields in valley floors, rising to a final ridge about five miles away level with my cabin. Sounds idyllic and it is. But these conditions do make me more aware of the natural world – including its power. There have been a number of spectacular thunderstorms, with frequent lightning-strikes, some close by. A hailstorm so intense it destroyed the retreat centre's vegetable garden. And I'm very appreciative of what sustains me here. Once a week, Gerard or Sara drive here in the Land Rover to leave fruit and vegetables in my dustbin down the track. Around the back of the hut, gas cylinders for cooking. Slightly up the valley side, a big tank full of drinking water just for me. On the hut's grass roof, a solar panel - so I can charge up this iPad I'm writing on.

Over the past 11 years I have made changes to how I live, in order to reduce my impact on the natural world. I haven't flown since 2006, and have a very low carbon footprint – for someone living in the United Kingdom (UK). But if everyone on Earth lived as we do on average in the UK, we would need around 3 Earths to produce all the resources needed⁶. What right have I to a greater share of the planet's resources than is available to most people, and to a lifestyle supported by a system which is on a collision-course with the biosphere? I find that poignant. My whole life, all my happiest memories and best experiences, has been supported by a system which is so creative (at least, for people living in wealthy countries) – but also so destructive of life on Earth.

I'm a Buddhist (a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order) – and I've been wondering how to respond to this situation, especially from a Buddhist perspective. Globally speaking, I'm leading a wealthy, resource-intensive lifestyle which is contributing much more to stressing the biosphere than most people on Earth. So it would seem

appropriate to consider the traditional Buddhist practice of simplicity and fewness of possessions – which in itself is a significant challenge to neoliberal values. And, given Buddhism’s emphasis on non-harming and compassion for suffering – I want to engage with society as creatively as possible. I believe Buddhism has a great deal to offer in challenging the neoliberal story. It has a treasury of teachings and practices which can help us as individuals to change and grow, and to live more in the things that really matter – such as love, compassion and wisdom. We can move away from consumerism by living spiritually and physically healthier and more fulfilling lives – and by embodying this kind of change, we can begin to transform society itself.

But exactly how to do all that, in practical terms? For Buddhists there can be a tension between transforming self (to better promote transformation in the world), and working more directly for social change. Particularly for Buddhists there are dangers at either extreme: of becoming either an overly self-preoccupied meditator, or of losing self-awareness in activism - of becoming angry and burnt-out.

This book is very introductory, exploring the questions ‘what’s going on?’ and ‘how might we respond?’ – particularly from a Buddhist point of view. It’s primarily addressing people who identify as Buddhists, but also anyone who is interested in Buddhist ideas, or in spiritual responses to these times. I am advocating progressive and green political ideas. I believe that a more compassionate society, which looks after the natural world and human beings, is much more possible than we probably tend to think. Also, that such a vision isn’t naïvely idealistic, but in fact much more rooted in reality than neoliberalism. And, whilst we all have our own relationship with our ideals, and with society, it does seem to me that Buddhism and neoliberal ideology are fundamentally opposed.

In writing, I’ve tried to keep a global perspective in mind, but there is a strong focus on the UK, Europe, and to some extent the USA. That’s mainly because I live in the UK: but it’s also because neoliberalism derives from classical economics, and climate change largely from the Industrial Revolution - both of which grew out of European beliefs and culture. Sometimes I use the words ‘we’ and ‘modernity’ – by which I’m assuming that you are probably someone who, like me, is living a relatively wealthy lifestyle in global terms. And that we are both, to some extent, part of the capitalist,

consumerist culture which manifests differently around the world – but shares some key features.

The book starts by looking at the power and nature of stories themselves, before exploring some of the factors that gave birth to the neoliberal worldview, and to climate change. It goes on to look at some of the stories dominating our world today, and some stories that we might be telling ourselves – particularly about the future. It asks the question: how does Buddhism compare with neoliberal ideology, and what does it have to offer the modern world? The second half of the book looks at a range of ways we can respond creatively to the ecological and political situation – both in our personal and collective lives. It examines some of the deeper issues (and shadows) that might arise when we embark on transforming self and world, and suggests resources that might help. The book ends by celebrating what contemporary Buddhism is already bringing to the world, but calls for a culture change. It suggests that engaging more in Buddhist activism – speaking out more and campaigning for system change – might be what we need to do in order to stay true to the Buddha’s teaching, in these times.

PART ONE: THE WORLD TODAY AND BUDDHIST RESPONSES

1. STORIES WE HAVE INHERITED

The power of stories

In the former Soviet Union, in the 1930s, at the height of Stalin’s purges, a couple bravely asked the dictator if a relative of theirs, who was about to be purged, could be spared. But Stalin regretfully declined, explaining he was quite simply unable to help. He pointed out that even one of his own close relatives had been purged. ‘Isn’t it awful!’, he said. It was as if the purges were like bad weather, or some kind of natural catastrophe which affected everyone, even the great leader¹.

But the truth is, that hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of people were killed – simply out of Stalin’s personal deluded paranoia. It was systematic – officials were set targets or quotas, meaning they had to come up with a certain number of names

of people to be purged. Officials who didn't fulfil their quota might come under suspicion themselves².

Stalin's purges are, in a way, a good example of how much difference one politician can make. It is an extreme example – but it does illustrate a truth about our world which it is easy to forget. Our world is made of stories, which are told by people – and these stories can have huge effects. Of course, any individual refusing to cooperate with the process of drawing up lists of names and getting people killed would almost certainly have faced imprisonment or death themselves – and how would we have responded in their situation? I do have some compassion for the killers as well as the victims, but my point is about what actually happened: it became a self-supporting system. Almost everyone went along with it, because almost everyone else was going along with it. So thousands of people effectively cooperated with one man's paranoid delusion.

Margaret Thatcher's biographer, David Runciman, had this to say on her worldview: 'she had an extraordinary ability to reconcile her deepest convictions with her practical political interests...she had no desire to live in a world where her personal principles and private interests were at odds with each other'. So when talks between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev quite suddenly and unexpectedly began to focus on decommissioning nuclear weapons, Thatcher was alarmed that this thaw in the Cold War might negatively affect her party's electoral prospects. Reducing the risk of nuclear war really was, for her, very much a secondary consideration³.

Tony Blair, according to the Chilcot report of 2016, grossly misrepresented the truth to gain support for the UK joining the USA's invasion of Iraq starting in 2003⁴ - a conflict in which hundreds of thousands died, and which benefited few besides the arms manufacturers and oil companies. In order to build his case for invasion, Blair had claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, whilst knowing that this was in fact extremely unlikely. After the conflict, it was found that Iraq had no such weapons, and extremely limited capacity for building any. In relation to the power of stories, it's striking that the Chilcot enquiry found that the case for Iraq

possessing nuclear weapons, which had been put together by the security services, appeared to contain elements taken from the Hollywood film The Rock⁵.

My point is that very big things happen (or don't happen) in the world – including things which had previously seemed inconceivable - because of human beings and the stories we tell, or invent. And the stories we tell come out of our worldview: how we want or need to see the world, our personal psychologies, how we were brought up and so on. Some stories have so much momentum behind them that they seem more like huge, impersonal, unchallengeable realities. Even if, when looked at rationally, some of them might nevertheless be nonsensical. For example, our global economy is structured around the core belief that endless economic growth is not just possible but necessary. So far, economists and governments are in almost complete denial that there are any ecological limits to economic growth – that there is any problem with infinite growth on a finite planet⁶.

But even the biggest stories come from human beings – our belief-systems and worldviews. Which is why our ideas matter, and what we do or say. Or what we don't oppose, what we allow to happen.

Stories can be changed

William Wilberforce and his many allies succeeded in getting the slave trade abolished in 1807. On the face of it, this campaign shouldn't have worked. Slavery was part of the UK's economy, and slave-owning was socially acceptable. Slavery was the basis of the fortunes of many people who were regarded as perfectly respectable or even admirable – such as the Liberal leader W E Gladstone. A genteel middle class widow might own one or two slaves, a lord might own a whole plantation and the slaves on it. Families, institutions and whole towns, such as the seaport of Bristol, directly prospered from it. Slavery was woven into the fabric of English society in the 18th century, and its legacy is still with us⁷. The fortune behind the Tate art galleries in London, for example, originated with the sugar and slave trade.

But the abolitionist campaign wasn't just up against a great deal of money and many powerful people. It was up against stories⁸. In Parliament, MPs representing their wealthy constituents swore that abolition would ruin business, and the country. That slavery was simply necessary to sugar production to make it economically viable. That, contrary to the propaganda of the opposition, the slaves were well-treated and indeed happy to be lifted from savagery into respectable employment.

So how did the abolitionists win? They used a lot of creativity⁹. They involved sympathetic and influential society ladies – who banned sugar from their tea-parties, saying it was stained with slaves' blood. They got an ex-slave to tell his story. They wrote pamphlets and books, held rallies, got up petitions, gave speeches in Parliament. But despite all the inspiration and creativity, it seems important that they just kept going – despite what must have seemed hopeless odds.

It's true that the abolition of 1807 wasn't the absolute and final overcoming of all forms of slavery. But it does show that you can never tell what's going to happen. The self-interest of the powerful can, sometimes, be overcome. What establishment politicians and business people say is ethical, or necessary, might not be ethical or necessary. Determined, intelligent and prolonged campaigning can succeed against overwhelming odds. The human story is conditional. It is built of many conditions, made up of many stories – and stories can change, or be changed.

Human nature is not fixed and unchanging

One important story, which tends to limit what we think we are capable of both as individuals and collectively, is the story of what is 'natural' – of 'human nature'. On close inspection, there's no such thing as 'natural' – if 'natural' means something finished, correct or legitimate in some kind of absolute sense. Considering the evolution of life on Earth, our human body itself appears to be not the final result of God's plan, but the temporary form we have reached through a long history of responding to conditions. In that long history, every organ now present in our body (including our brains) has changed radically, and adapted its purpose. Hands that were well-adapted for life in the trees gradually became hands capable of precision gripping – possibly in order to better make tools. In its history, Homo sapiens interbred with other human species – so that today around 2% of the genomes of

modern non-African populations is made up of Neanderthal DNA¹⁰. There is no pure, fixed essence to human beings: everything about us is part of a vast, ever-changing web of conditions.

Neoliberalism tells the story that we human beings are hard-wired by our evolution to be naturally competitive: that our aggression and ruthlessness made us the dominant species on Earth. But as an article in the journal Frontiers in Psychology points out, we are 'spectacularly unusual when compared to other animals' in our degree of altruism¹¹. Studies in evolutionary biology, neuroscience and psychology show that co-operation and altruism are in fact what define us as a species. We evolved in African savannahs where we were slower and weaker than our potential predators and most of our prey. Co-operation in order to hunt large animals would have been important, but so would the social and communication skills necessary for a community to be resilient – including compassion and empathy¹².

And just as there isn't a single, pure human nature, there is no single uniquely-authentic story of the unfolding of humanity's true potential. The human story is not one of simple 'upward' progress from the Stone Age to the technologically-advanced consumerist society of today. In his book Sapiens: A brief history of humankind Yuval Noah Harari points out, for example, that there were very significant downsides when human populations transitioned from hunter-gathering to agriculture. Evidence suggests that the humans living in the first settlements were significantly more subject to disease and starvation than people living as hunter-gatherers – from physical proximity to the animals they were managing, from poor sanitation, and from dependence on a greatly-reduced number of food-sources (including crops that sometimes failed). The Agricultural Revolution enabled complex human societies to support specialisation and evolve – eventually leading to the flowering of human creativity in the arts, science and religion. But the majority of the human population in those early societies seem to have been leading significantly harder (possibly even shorter and unhappier) lives than their hunter-gatherer ancestors¹³.

The European story is just one story amongst many

In its essentials, the transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture as it happened in Europe was similar to how the same process happened in other parts of the world. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle is flexible – a small tribe can adapt its diet according to what plants or animals are most plentiful, or relocate to seek other food sources. But cultivating crops or flocks of animals implies staying in one place, and significantly less flexibility in relation to food-sources.

The transition entailed a fundamental change of worldview, a new relationship with the natural world – and perhaps a new kind of anxiety. Rather than living in the natural world and being able to respond to its changes, the early agriculturalists started to live apart from the natural world, and to control it. In terms of worldview they were moving away from the reverence for earth-mother figures and animist beliefs of their hunter-gatherer ancestors, towards polytheism, monotheism and patriarchy. The new religions implied a strong hierarchy: the gods (or God) above, humans below, with all plants and animals below humans. As in this example from Christianity (Genesis 1:28 English Standard Version):

‘And God said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’

From the Stone Age onwards there was a steady growth in the human population as it spread round the globe, with a slow increase in resource use and human impact on the natural world. Up to around 1400, Europe did not have technological or military superiority over other societies globally. It had a sophisticated culture, but so had China, for example. But for reasons not fully understood by historians, science (and the scientific method) took off in Europe – in a reciprocal relationship with global exploration, trade and empire-building – to an extent that didn’t happen elsewhere¹⁴. These developments formed the basis for the explosion of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism in Europe in the 19th century – which became so influential in our world today. The Industrial Revolution brought great benefits to the globally-wealthy, but also a massive increase in human impacts on the planet. In particular, the burning of fossil fuels which powered it were the main factor in triggering climate change. Looking at it globally, what happened in Europe does not appear the only or inevitable or best outcome of human development. It’s just how

the human story went in one part of the world – which brought great benefits to the human race, but also huge problems.

The European story and climate change

At the global climate talks held at Copenhagen in 2009, the USA explicitly refused to even consider 'equity'. In this context equity was the idea (sometimes called 'contraction and convergence') that the wealthy nations which did most to trigger climate change should take that into account when negotiating on which countries might reduce their emissions by which amount¹⁵. Or when considering assistance for developing countries in the task of 'green' transition – improving their standard of living whilst at the same time reducing global emissions. (The developed countries have less than 20% of the world's population, but have emitted almost 70% of the greenhouse gases now causing climate change)¹⁶. In recent years the wealthy countries have done very little to challenge the USA's position. Given that the people already on the sharp end of climate change are often economically-poor people of colour, who have usually contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions, it's hard not to see an inherent injustice and even structural racism in this.

As an example of what this can mean in practice, in 2006 Acción Ecológica proposed that Ecuador might not cut down its rainforest to extract the vast oil reserves underneath it, if partly compensated by the wealthy countries for lost revenue. The funds given would go towards renewable energy transition. By 2013 only \$200m of a target \$3.6b had been raised, and extraction began in 2016. A spokesman for the Ecuadorean government said:

“The alternative of having children without schools, without hospitals, without health infrastructure, without clean water, is not an alternative. No nation should allow its children to live without the basics for human dignity. If that is not an alternative for the UK, it is not for Ecuador either”¹⁷

What worldviews have we inherited?

How do people in the wealthy countries manage to live with such global inequality – particularly in the face of climate change and its history? The aim here is not to give

an authoritative survey of human history, but to suggest that there are some very important assumptions and myths (particularly deriving from European worldviews) which determine how much of our global culture actually works. And that we need to challenge some of these myths.

Whether we believe in God or not, elements of the Judaeo-Christian worldview deriving from the Old Testament are still extremely influential. Man has a God-given right to be at the centre of His Creation. In this hierarchy, Man is above woman - and the natural world is just there for Man to use as he sees fit. (Today, the vast majority of the world's super-rich are men, likewise the vast majority of large-corporation and political leaders). In this worldview, mind is above body, reason and rationality above emotion or instinct. Nowadays, we have a technocratic confidence that through science and the huge power it has given us, we can dominate the natural world, and get what we want. And the European story, which has become so influential globally, has never really lost a sense of specialness, chosenness. Even if we don't believe in God, maybe we have an unconscious sense of having a special relationship with Him, and an unconscious sense of entitlement to a greater share of the world's resources than other peoples. And in our post-Romantic and neoliberal culture, we tend to elevate the personal above the collective: the story of our individual selves and choices above the needs of the societies around us.

At the same time, and paradoxically, perhaps we have taken God's place, or internalised him. Perhaps, very unconsciously, we see ourselves as not just at the centre of the universe, but as the universe itself. As we look into our mobile phones, and get lost in the internet or Facebook - our subjective world becomes the world that matters to us.

Clearly, these stories and worldviews depend upon assumptions about human nature, about values, how best we can live with each other, and about our relationship with the natural world. Speculating about the assumptions we have inherited can give us a sense of conditionality. There have been (and are) many stories about human nature. Human beings have successfully lived together and related to the natural world in many different ways - and still do. All these things, including the neoliberal worldview, are not set in stone - they have changed a great deal in time, and will continue to do so.

2. STORIES THAT RULE OUR PRESENT: AND STORIES ABOUT OUR FUTURE

But what are the stories which are most powerfully influencing the present historical moment, right now? There are many ideas, cultures and views in the world - but if there is such a thing as a culture which is present all over the world, which dominates how the world works economically (and, increasingly, politically) it is the culture of the corporations, such as Macdonalds, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Microsoft. It is the neoliberal worldview of the capitalist, consumerist, industrial growth society that originated in Europe and the USA which is having the biggest influence globally.

The origins of neoliberalism

So we'll start with the story of neoliberalism - how did it originate and develop, what are its main features, what does it claim to do and what does it actually do.

After the Second World War, a small group of businessmen and academics (including Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman) began to think about how to challenge the status quo - meaning the sort of society which included a welfare state, unions, regulation of business and left wing influence in politics.

This crystallised in a new version of classical economics which became known as neoliberalism. But it was never just an economic theory – it always had a vision of how the world should be. Its main ideas are to have minimum state regulation of business (if any at all), to shrink the role of the state in society, to privatise public services, to minimise taxation on the wealthy, to maximise the role of the market in society. It assumes that endless economic growth is not only possible but necessary for healthy economies, and that there are no ecological limits to growth.

Neoliberalism claims to be the best system for promoting the economic wellbeing of societies. But what it actually does is to promote inequality, and to ensure that resources flow from the less well-off to the already-rich.

In some ways this was nothing new, or only a new formulation of pre-existing tendencies. Throughout history, business has wanted to make money, and to influence government or society in order to do so - philanthropy was always an optional extra for those so inclined. In a way, this was just business re-asserting itself after the temporary successes of socialism in the first half of the twentieth century. And it's striking that, back in the 1950s, neoliberalism was a tiny movement, just a handful of people very much in a minority.

Neoliberalism's growth to global dominance does illustrate the power of ideas, but was also assisted by globalisation. Meaning the spread of consumerist culture and worldview, but also the creation and growing influence of global corporations. This process was greatly facilitated by international trade agreements and bodies such as the World Trade Organisation. The biggest global corporations are individually bigger and more powerful than some whole countries in economic terms - and collectively they have considerable global influence¹. You might not like what a corporation is doing to local communities, the environment or its workforce in your country - but a global corporation can easily move its investment elsewhere. A country might vote against neoliberal austerity policies, but be forced by the international business community to adopt them.

The shock doctrine

There is a dark side to neoliberalism, as described by Naomi Klein in her book The Shock Doctrine. One of the more extreme examples she describes was Chile in 1973. The democratically-elected Popular Unity government was ousted by the army, assisted by the CIA. The military violently took control of government, and executed or disappeared more than 3,200 political opponents. Neoliberal economists, including Milton Friedman, worked with the military, and introduced aggressive 'free market' reforms. Business was deregulated, state enterprises privatised, unions disabled, social spending cut. Within one year of the takeover, the country's economy had contracted by 15%, and unemployment had risen from 3 to 20%. With the economy in shock, and suffering from food shortages, the population was duly cowed and dissent crushed.

But usually big business hasn't had to work so openly with violence in order to get its way. Through combinations of economic pressure and persuasion, it has had

great or significant influence almost all over the world, including the former Soviet Union and China. One of its features, with particular relevance to climate change, is exploitation of natural disasters. When the tsunami struck Sri Lanka in 2004, more than 80% of those who died were local people who had been living on the beaches and making their living from the sea for generations. But on Sri Lanka's east coast, these people were prevented from returning to the beaches to pursue their traditional livelihood - forced instead to become dependent on food handouts and live in temporary camps. Before the tsunami, there had been considerable resistance in Sri Lanka to the forces of globalisation. But after the disaster, with great need for international investment to rebuild infrastructure, the government became much more open to what international finance wanted in return. As part of that process, the east coast fisherfolk were given little choice but to remain in their camps, whilst developers were allowed to build high-class hotels for plutocrats on the beaches².

Disaster capitalism also took advantage of the destruction wreaked on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The low-income, old or sick inhabitants left stranded by the flooding were predominantly people of colour and clearly not a priority of George W. Bush's government. Long delays and lack of funding dogged the rescue effort. Corporate contractors were awarded lucrative contracts to provide immediate relief, such as mobile homes, and rebuild infrastructure. But the reality was that the corporations made a great deal of profit. After all the layers of subcontractors took their cut, the people of New Orleans received too little help, which was poorly targeted and far too late. Looking at contracts valued at \$8.75b, congressional investigators later found 'significant overcharges, wasteful spending, or mismanagement'. Partly to fund the relief effort, in November 2005 the Republican-controlled Congress cut \$40b from the federal budget. Programmes slashed included Medicaid, student loans and food stamps. So the victims of Hurricane Katrina were hit twice: by a rescue operation driven by corporate profiteering, and then by the slashing of the few national programmes assisting the unemployed and working poor.

The short story is that public services and infrastructure in New Orleans were generally creaking or past breaking-point before Katrina. After the hurricane, they were either allowed to wither away, or were turned into business opportunities. For

example dozens of state schools became charter schools – meaning that overall the emphasis became more on cutting costs and making profits than on the needs of students. Two years after the disaster the public transport system was gutted and had lost half its workers, the vast majority of publicly owned housing projects were still boarded up and empty, and there was still lack of clean water in many parts of the town³.

Hurricane Katrina is a striking example of how whole sections of society can be just discounted, left behind, treated as of no importance – even within one of the wealthiest societies on Earth. It does not bode well as an indicator of how more neoliberal countries (such as the USA and UK) are likely to respond to climate change.

What neoliberalism says it does and what it actually does

I've no wish to demonise capitalism or business. Clearly, the dynamism and innovation of capitalism have brought many benefits to humanity. And I see nothing intrinsically wrong with trade, or making money, or people being rewarded for talent or hard work.

But the benefits have not been well-shared, and a number of claims are made for neoliberal economics which are very questionable at least. Neoliberal policies have been influential around the world, and especially dominant for the last 30 years in the UK and USA – so it's not as if the supposed benefits to society have not had time to reveal themselves. One of the main defences of neoliberalism is that looking after business promotes a healthy economy. The wealthy will spend their money and there will be a 'trickle down' of wealth and other benefits to the rest of society. But there is very good evidence that the effect of neoliberal policies is not 'trickle down' but 'trickle up'. Globally speaking, wealth is consistently concentrating in the hands of fewer and fewer people. And this trend towards increasing inequality is clearly manifesting within the more neoliberal countries themselves, as well as globally⁴.

And this phenomenon is not good for societies. Across a wide range of social welfare measures, the more neoliberal countries score worse. Across the OECD countries life expectancy, child wellbeing, literacy, social mobility and trust all score

better in more equal societies – whilst infant mortality, obesity, teenage pregnancy, homicide rates and incidence of mental illness are all worse in less equal ones⁵. In the USA, the generation born in the late 1970s is the first in USA history to face the prospect of lower living standards than their parents'. By 2006, this generation was worse off than their parents at a similar age on almost every measure: lower wages and less benefits, more likely to be indebted, far more likely to be unemployed or in jail⁶.

In a more neoliberal society, things like public health, social welfare and ecological impacts are always someone else's problem. Big business says that it has a duty to its shareholders to maximise profits, that it operates within the laws laid down by government - whilst lobbying hard to make sure that government regulation does not get in its way. It is perhaps hard for anyone to grasp just how influential big business is on government. To give an idea of scale: in 2013 the oil and gas industries spent \$400,000 per day lobbying the USA Congress and government officials⁷. In the UK, at least 50 employees of companies including EDF Energy, nPower and Centrica were placed in government to work on energy issues. These personnel were provided free of charge, and worked in government for up to 2 years each (from 2007 to 2011)⁸. On the other hand, neoliberal politicians expect corporate responsibility to make social problems go away. In 2017 UK Prime Minister Theresa May went to the annual meeting of global business leaders at Davos and made a speech complaining that big business wasn't doing enough to regulate itself⁹.

Neoliberalism tells the story that, with talent and hard work, anyone can make it. This myth plays a significant role in gaining acceptance for neoliberal austerity measures. It implies that society may be tough, but is basically fair. There are opportunities, you too might make it. But the evidence suggests that neoliberalism works against social mobility¹⁰. There are true cases of 'rags to riches', of individuals from poor or deprived backgrounds winning through to great wealth. But these stories are very much the exception, not the rule. In general, people with great wealth were born into it. CEOs of corporations award themselves huge pay rises and bonuses, but the evidence suggests that this greater remuneration is not proportionate to talent, performance or benefits to the company¹¹. The more

neoliberal society holds social divisions in place and increases them. If you are born into a well-off family, you are born into a stream of resources, especially education, which will very much tend to keep you well-off. If you were not born into a well-off family, there will be very few opportunities for you to move 'up' in the world economically. Neoliberal policies do not provide a level playing-field.

Globally, tax avoidance by multinationals alone is colossal – estimated to be around \$600 billion per year by IMF researchers¹². In 2010 the Tax Justice Network estimated that the accumulated private financial wealth of individuals unreported in tax havens globally amounted to between \$21 and 32 trillion¹³. In 2016 it was estimated that in the UK alone, if corporations and the super-rich paid the tax they should (even under extant legislation) there would be no national budget deficit. But tax avoidance (connived at by successive governments in the UK¹⁴) is just a more obvious example of systemic injustice. There are very many ways in which money and resources keep moving towards the already-wealthy – and they don't often feature in the mainstream media. To take a few examples: globally, fossil fuel corporations receive considerably more subsidy than do attempts to develop renewable energy¹⁵. And the profits from these corporations generally accrue to investors who are not poor. In the UK, if you are a landowner, you aren't taxed on the income which you probably derive through that ownership. Yet many landowners are already wealthy people¹⁶. It is true that there are small-scale hill-farmers who have become stressed or even suicidal trying to keep their way of life going – who depend on EU subsidies to survive. But there are also very wealthy landowners who receive generous subsidies (as 'farmers') for doing little more than owning land.

Again in the UK, local authorities are forced to build and finance new public facilities such as hospitals using the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The way this is set up ensures that the private financiers will make large profits, and the project will be ruinously expensive for the local authority¹⁷. Privatisation is often a form of asset-stripping of the public sector¹⁸. Public services are sold off cheaply to well-off private investors or to multinational companies, a process which can sometimes aid the impoverishment of an already-struggling economy (as in Greece, 2016). The human cost of these obscure financial arrangements is not necessarily immediately

obvious. But in a well-off country, these big policy decisions - things like PFI - make the difference between, say, a suicidal person getting the support they need, or not. Globally speaking, neoliberal policies make the difference between someone getting enough to eat, or not.

Neoliberalism, climate change and the biosphere

The position of big business on climate change is essentially that this is a job for government. On the whole, business sees much more opportunity for making money by pursuing business as usual, and not doing anything about climate change, than in making the kind of adjustments needed. In 2016 the insurance industry issued a serious warning about the impact of climate change from its point of view. The much greater risk of loss and damage will mean that insurance will become much more costly, or just not possible¹⁹. At the same time, parts of the insurance industry are pushing for the kinds of deregulation which will enable the industry to make money even in the face of climate change – for example greater freedom to raise rates, and to drop customers in high-risk areas²⁰.

Obviously, there are businesses making money from 'green' technology - but that sector is still very much small-scale and in its infancy. Looking at energy, for example, the political will to promote the sustainable sector can be fickle – as the history of the 'Green Deal' in the UK illustrates. From the point of view of climate change, we need to keep almost all the fossil fuels in the ground, reduce our resource use and move to renewable energy as quickly as possible. But fossil fuel corporations are showing almost no interest in changing their business model. In the early 2000s, British Petroleum (BP) promoted itself as 'Beyond Petroleum', and did take a tiny step in the direction of sustainable energy (tiny in proportion to the size of the corporation). BP did build some wind farms, but then drew back from that sector. In subsequent years, the scale of this investment was considerably reduced²¹. On the whole, fossil fuel companies simply defend their business interests - including through influencing governments, or public opinion. For example, in 2015 it came to light that Exxon, through its own research, had been fully aware of the reality of climate change as early as 1981. But it had suppressed its own findings, and funded climate change denial for decades²².

Corporate dominance of global economics and politics

Looked at one way, much of humanity's negative impacts on the natural world happen through inertia. There is a huge market for palm oil - for example - so rainforest gets destroyed. There's just not enough political will or incentive to stop it happening. Again, there are serious concerns that 'industrial agriculture' - intensive farming involving high levels of pesticide, fertiliser and other technology - is leading to soil degradation globally and will endanger future food security. There is good evidence that some combination of industrial agriculture and organic farming could address these concerns²³. But the existing system just keeps running the same way. Similarly with over-fishing leading to catastrophic collapses of certain fish populations - and many similar examples.

But the corporations give inertia a considerable helping hand. All over the world, corporations are heavily involved in shaping any policy that influences profits. It is partly a matter of numbers and resources. On any contentious issue, environmentalist groups will have far less money behind them than the corporations - which translates into how many people can spend time researching and preparing cases, how much publicity can be commissioned and so on.

Similarly, the corporations have great influence over the international trade agreements which effectively structure the global economy. These trade agreements lock in and exacerbate existing global economic inequalities. So, if you are a coffee farmer in Africa, working very hard long days - you will receive very little money for your crop. Practically speaking, you have to sell your crop to a middle man, or men, in a supply chain until it reaches the roasting/processing stage, after which it will be sold to a supermarket chain and then the consumer. It's not theoretically impossible for the coffee farmer to sidestep the supply chain, process his own beans, sell direct to the consumer and receive far more money for his crop - but it is in practice extremely difficult or impossible²⁴.

International 'free trade' agreements tend very much not to favour action on climate change. They usually include provisions allowing private companies to sue national governments that pass laws which effectively reduce a company's profits. So, for example, in 2012 an oil company began using the North American Free Trade

Agreement to challenge Quebec's moratorium on fracking – claiming it has a legal right to make money in that way²⁵.

In the UK, there are corporation-funded 'think tanks' which claim to be merely centres of intellectual enquiry - but which appear to function much more like pressure groups or lobbyists²⁶. In the USA, corporations make huge donations to the two main political parties - which make it unlikely that any candidate in favour of regulating the corporations will get elected.

Finally, there is the 'revolving door' between the worlds of politics and big business²⁷. In the UK and USA, many politicians come from the world of business, and go back to it after being politicians - or perhaps keep more than a foot in both worlds. In the USA the door appears to have stopped revolving altogether. President Donald Trump (and many of his inner circle) has not stopped being a businessman. Looking at his career so far, and the range of his business interests, it's hard to believe that Trump will not personally make considerable financial profit from his time as US President. But what's more worrying for the long term is Trump's considerable apparent lack of interest in representing any other concerns than those of his own white, male, business elite.

Neoliberal saturation of the media

In the UK, at least, even a mainstream newspaper such as The Guardian which isn't owned by a large corporation,²⁸ is probably influenced to some extent by its need to generate advertising revenue from the corporations. It's true that there are journalists and film-makers who raise progressive and green perspectives - but they are in a tiny minority. Alternative perspectives - even from the official opposition party in the House of Commons - are considerably under-reported. Even in a traditionally progressive newspaper like The Guardian, alternative perspectives are often subtly made to seem unrealistic, impractical or unnecessary.

All this has considerable effect - even on people who seek out non-mainstream sources of information or interpretation. No matter how intelligent someone is, if all they read is this media - it will form their worldview. It's why, in the UK, many people - on a low income particularly - really believe that immigration (rather than

austerity measures) is the main reason for economic inequality and unemployment where they live²⁹. In the USA, corporate funding of populist right-wing movements such as the Tea Party and Americans For Prosperity has influenced people on low income to favour pro-corporate policies. Thinking to defend the personal liberty of entrepreneurs to make money and promote a healthy economy, workers have campaigned against their own interests. They have opposed measures like Obama's healthcare reforms, defended tax cuts for the rich, and voted for politicians like Trump³⁰.

Authoritarianism, racism and dissent

Perhaps it's not surprising that there appears to be a strong relationship between big business and right-wing politics. Left-wing politics, traditionally, tends to be pro-union, about championing the rights of the less well-off or the vulnerable in society. In the last twenty years or so, certainly in the USA and UK, the traditionally left wing political parties became much more business-friendly - a sort of neoliberal-lite. Nominally left-wing political parties have certainly on occasion served the neoliberal agenda - for example the UK's Labour Party expanding the PFI (after the Conservatives introduced it in 1992). So, many lower-income people have been left feeling unrepresented, and perhaps resentful of a well-off world which seems to have left them behind. That's a power-vacuum which right-wing populist politicians have effectively exploited. These politicians have deflected attention away from the neoliberal austerity measures (which have worsened conditions for lower-income people³¹) by exploiting concerns about immigration - and this has contributed to an increase in open racism (in the UK at least). And whilst these populist politicians might use anti-establishment rhetoric to win votes, in reality they are pro-business.

Arguably, more right-wing authoritarian regimes serve big business by repressing dissent. Pro-environmental campaigning has, on occasion, prevented or delayed fracking projects or closed down mines - which is certainly not good for the businesses looking to make money from them. In countries with authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan - peaceful demonstrations or even journalism on social welfare or environmental concerns are dealt with harshly (see Chapter 8 for some examples).

All this is not to say that authoritarianism is simply and purely neoliberalism. Authoritarian regimes are supported by many factors, such as religious, nationalist and ethnic divisions. But the neoliberal agenda flourishes with authoritarianism, and if that agenda isn't effectively challenged, it seems likely that authoritarianism will spread to other countries.

How about working with big business?

Some people say they are working with power, in order to influence it for the better - with the corporations, or with right-wing parties. They may well be sincere, but possibly deluded about the ultimate effectiveness of this strategy. There are very few signs of these leopards actually changing their spots – whilst there are many signs of them using camouflage and presentation to get what they want.

We need to assess political parties and corporations not on the basis of what they say they are doing, but on what they are in fact doing, on the real effect of their policies - and on their track record. Corporations may be keen to present themselves as benign and responsible citizens, through advertising, public relations and glossy websites. They might really be running programmes to help people learn to read, they might really be investing in wind power. But how much money are they investing? On closer inspection, such efforts at corporate philanthropy are usually so tiny (in comparison to the size of the corporation and its profits) as to be little more than photo-opportunities. If I were to give 1p to someone begging in the street - what would that mean?³²

When Naomi Klein was researching corporate responsibility for her book This Changes Everything: capitalism versus the climate, the biggest and apparently most sincere example she could find was Richard Branson's Virgin empire. In 2006 Branson pledged to spend \$3b over the next 10 years developing biofuels as alternatives to oil, and other technologies to fight climate change. This was to be 'Gaia capitalism' – saving the planet and doing successful business at the same time. But this good intention ended up getting sidetracked in many different ways. Quite apart from big questions about biofuels in relation to greenhouse gas emissions and food security – by 2013 it was looking like Virgin's total investment in this initiative was in any case unlikely to exceed \$300m. Without telling the full story here, the

project almost entirely failed to deliver, and (tellingly) dissolved into straightforward money-making³³.

Quite simply, the idea that corporations might self-regulate in regard to any matter of common concern (such as climate change) has taken a very long time to deliver almost nothing. After all, how likely is it that a business will respond positively to a polite request that it make less money for the good of the planet? Some religious investors in fossil fuel companies claim to be using 'shareholder pressure' to be a positive influence. Presumably the 'pressure' is the possibility of taking investment away from the company in question. But year after year, investors make the same requests, the company effectively ignores them, and the investors don't walk away. So why should a fossil fuel company be concerned about losing investment - especially when it knows the investors value their profits?³⁴

Credible alternatives to neoliberal economics

In the UK in 2017, undergraduate economics students were demonstrating against the way they were being taught economics. Apparently, they were mainly being assessed by multiple-choice questions - to which there was only one correct answer. In effect, they were being required to learn one version of economics only - the neoliberal version - and simply reproduce that, without questioning it at all³⁵.

Especially since the fall of the Soviet Union, neoliberal capitalism has been held up as the best system, the only system which really works, which eventually benefits everyone. But there are a number of examples of successful capitalist economies which are distinctly not neoliberal. Japan and Sweden show that healthy economies can be combined with much less unequal and more caring societies. They manifest far less extreme inequalities of income, and on many social indicators score better than more neoliberal societies such as the UK and USA³⁶.

As Tim Jackson points out in his book Prosperity without Growth, the model of constant and endless economic growth requires that consumption be stimulated. But, as he shows, once basic needs are met, increasing standards of living (entailing greater consumption of resources) does not bring greater happiness³⁷. Neoliberal

ideology takes this basic feature of the capitalist economic model and exacerbates its social effects. It promotes greed and consumption in order to maximise profits and keep growth going, whilst discouraging compassion and altruistic activity.

A growing number of economists (such as Thomas Piketty, Joseph Stiglitz and Ha-Joon Chang) - are questioning neoliberal economics. (Even the International Monetary Fund is part of this questioning, for example in its 2016 paper 'Neoliberalism – oversold?'). Apart from its immediate effects upon society - when will economic inequality stop increasing? The logic of neoliberalism works only in one direction - towards the greater concentration of wealth in fewer hands, which in the long term cannot be sustainable. And the ecological consequences of endless economic growth are becoming more obvious each year.

Tim Jackson suggests that, on a planet with finite resources, there are physical, non-negotiable ecological limits to economic growth, and that such growth cannot be combined with the decreased resource use needed to combat climate change. The efficiencies needed to both maintain economic growth and reduce consumption appropriately would be impossibly huge – and show no sign of becoming technically possible (or culturally acceptable) any time soon³⁸. He proposes that we start to develop an economics which takes account of the need for ecological limits to growth, and of the effects of inequality on society. That might start by setting appropriate ecological limits to economic activity – so for example limiting carbon emissions and resource extraction. A new global 'Green Deal' could support developing countries with green investment, sustainably improving standards of living, and protecting biodiversity. Economies would need to direct investment towards low-carbon activity, and perhaps support employment through reducing working hours. There would need to be a culture-change away from the consumerism which is the engine of economic growth – towards a different vision of prosperity and human flourishing. All this could make us happier. There is good evidence that people are happier in societies which are more equal, less atomised and hyper-individualistic - and which really promote community and social cohesion³⁹.

This would require considerable change, especially in the wealthy countries – and it's important to acknowledge the scale of what's needed. In 2009 Jackson suggested

that setting a global carbon budget that would be an appropriate response to climate change (including some improved living standards for developing countries) would leave the wealthy countries with something like $\frac{1}{4}$ of their 2009 GDP levels. In 2017 he wrote: 'In a world of 10 billion people all aspiring to Western lifestyles, the carbon intensity of every dollar of output must be 200 times lower in 2050 than it is today. Long before the middle of the century, economic activity will need to be taking carbon out of the atmosphere rather than adding to it'⁴⁰.

There's no reason in principle why this kind of macro-economic model shouldn't include entrepreneurship and private ownership. But it would need governments to intervene and invest in common benefits (such as the biosphere and a low-carbon, socially-cohesive society) much more than they do today.

When faced with a challenging situation, it's tempting to stay with the known, with what seems to work. And after all, the current economic model has been good for us personally. But we know endless economic growth cannot be sustained on a finite planet. This growth model, and the increasing levels of resource consumption it requires, is on a collision-course with the biosphere. It's like we're in a car, accelerating towards a brick wall. There certainly are risks involved in trying to steer this car away from the wall – but that course of action is considerably less risky than doing nothing.

Lifestyle changes, things like reducing the amount of stuff we buy, might be much easier in reality than they seem as an idea. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba's formal economy virtually collapsed – mainly due to the sudden removal of subsidised Soviet oil. The Cubans dug deep into their community spirit, and responded creatively in all sorts of ways – including mass growing of vegetables in cities, increases in cycling and new forms of public transport. It led directly to significant health improvements – obesity was halved and the percentage of physically active adults more than doubled. Between 1997 and 2002 there were big declines in deaths due to coronary heart disease, stroke and diabetes⁴¹. Life expectancy and infant mortality in Cuba are actually similar to those in the USA, despite the average Cuban having only about 15% of the income of the average American⁴². Wellbeing and fulfilment are complex phenomena and hard to measure. But it's clear that, once basic needs are met, the flourishing of people in a society

has far more to do with how that society is organised, than on its overall economic activity or wealth.

Clearly, changing the economic model to this extent would require us to change our notion of what society is, and of our roles as citizens. As Michael Sandel put it:

'A new politics of the common good isn't only about finding more scrupulous politicians. It also requires a more demanding idea of what it means to be a citizen, and it requires a more robust public discourse – one that engages more directly with moral and even spiritual questions.'⁴³

Thoughts and feelings about the future

So right now we are witnessing a slow-motion collision between our industrial growth society and the planet's non-negotiable ecological limits. There are some success stories, but globally carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions are still going up⁴⁴. Developing countries understandably wish to emulate the material advantages of the wealthy countries. Wealthy countries show few signs of getting off the train of ever-higher standards of living, ever-greater consumption of natural resources with ever-greater negative impacts on the biosphere.

So what now? How do we respond to this situation, and this story - which seems to have a rather depressing conclusion? How do we feel about it? What stories are we telling ourselves about the future? It can be helpful to reflect on our feelings and thoughts in this area – to bring into awareness areas of which we might be only semi-conscious. The following are some generalisations and analyses which may or may not apply to you, but which seem to describe the responses of many people.

Thinking about the future can provoke feelings of 'overwhelm': anxiety, depression, despair, grief, rage. We can feel over-responsible and irrationally guilty. We can get into thinking that we should do more – and even that the world's problems are somehow all our fault. Many of us, much of the time and for good reason, simply avoid thinking about the future - and in this area at least go emotionally numb. We get busy, and this helps us not to be aware. Or, we get into activism and resistance - but alternating between driven, angry hard work, and depressed exhaustion.

It can be worth reflecting that probably what's behind these feelings are all kinds of positive emotions⁴⁵. Those might include our love for people we're close to, for people in general - our love of beauty, of the world, and of life itself. The good news is that we don't have to stay stuck in the despair. Becoming aware of how we are feeling might well be initially painful. But there are ways of becoming more directly aware of the views underpinning the negative emotions – views like 'there's no good in the world', 'I'm worthless', 'I should be doing more' – then seeing through them and letting them go. There are techniques for letting go of obsessive negative thinking, for developing positive emotions and deepening self-confidence. Some of these techniques and practices are described in chapters five and six..

Though one of the best ways to heal ourselves might be to work on transforming the world – if we engage in ways that work for us personally. And we can do this work in every aspect of our lives: including lifestyle choices, livelihood, friendships, activism, the arts and so on. Which is broadly what the second part of this book is about.

Future scenarios

So much for the feelings and behaviours we might be getting into to some extent. But what do we think is actually going to happen in the future? What scenarios are we basing our feelings and responses upon, and can we examine them?

Many of us have a semi- or unconscious fear about the future which is a bit like a Hollywood disaster movie minus any kind of happy ending. Visions from these Hollywood films have a significant global influence on how people see the world, but themselves derive to some extent from the Judaeo-Christian worldview. According to the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, the Apocalypse is the final – and spectacular – catastrophe. At its end, God will install the virtuous in an eternal heaven, and damn the sinners to eternal hell. The Apocalypse is the end of human history.

Other Hollywood films have a 'happy' ending in which the righteous hero eventually wins through against great odds, often violently, and often seeming to be assisted by

almost supernatural good luck. But this ending too seems too neat and final – a kind of endless present tense. The bad guys have been annihilated and everything is perfect for the winners – the focus is often on a beautiful heterosexual white couple. All loose ends resolved - no imperfections or messy complications.

Maybe, deep down, we tend to alternate between these scenarios. One is Apocalypse: absolutely everything goes wrong, for ever. And one in which everything is magically, happily and endlessly resolved - despite overwhelming odds. The latter is like a dream, in which we keep surviving all kinds of horrors, because our unconscious mind cannot imagine our personal annihilation. Perhaps we even draw on this story in a semi-conscious way - we keep ourselves busy and tell ourselves that we'll muddle through climate change somehow, or the scientists will sort it out.

Winning and losing - and hope

A different but related version of these extremes is thinking in terms of winning or losing – including unconsciously or semi-consciously. Someone engaged in campaigning on a particular issue to achieve a particular result is likely to respond more in this way. Though of course it is also just a very human tendency in the face of a difficult situation.

In trying to cultivate a more resilient or deeper response to these issues, it can be helpful to critique all the above thoughts and feelings - and the scenarios or views they derive from. For a start, we quite literally don't know what is going to happen. As soon as we seriously try to predict what is going to happen, we become aware of the enormous complexities involved. And when we look at history, it becomes obvious that all the winnings and losings there have ever been have been relative and temporary - not absolute. There is no final outcome.

In the longer term, winning and losing look even more relative. The cosmologists tell us that at a certain point life will become impossible on our planet, and that eventually life will become impossible in our universe. Even if, as seems possible, there have been, are, and will be an infinite number of universes, it's almost certain that the human species will be an impermanent phenomenon. From a Buddhist perspective, impermanence just keeps going, there is no end in sight. Perhaps the

modern worldview of the consumer society is uncomfortable with and avoids really facing death - but as a species we need to come to terms with our own vulnerability and impermanence.

At the same time, life on Earth should have another 1.75 billion years or so to go, and this side of cosmological inevitabilities, there is plenty to play for. Rather than falling prey to terrifying or reassuring myths, we could acknowledge the situation - and cultivate a realistic sense that we don't know how things will turn out. It's worth recalling that there have been some dramatic shifts, when something happened which, only a short time previously, had seemed impossible. For example, around 1500 the Catholic Church in Europe seemed all-powerful and almost unassailable. Many people deplored its spiritual decadence and corruption - particularly manifesting in the notorious sale of 'indulgences' (clerical absolution from sins in return for money). And to advocate reform would have been to risk your job, or even your life. But when Martin Luther bravely published his 95 Theses in 1517, he set off an intellectual, social and spiritual revolution which eventually ended the Catholic Church's dominance in Europe.

Even Martin Luther's story is complicated, of course. He was heroic, but he wasn't entirely on his own - for example printers helped him by using the latest information technology of his day to popularise his message, and he wisely accepted physical protection from powerful allies. And not all the long-term consequences of the revolution he set off were positive. But it isn't too far-fetched to see parallels between the pre-Reformation Catholic Church and the neoliberal ideology which has so much global influence today. They have a common greed, obvious corruption, and dependence on irrational beliefs.

Who are we really?

When thinking about the conditionality of the human story, it's good to explore the meaning of the Axial Age⁴⁶. This is the term given to the period from around 500BC, when there was a flourishing of human thought, including the Buddha, Confucius, Zarathustra, Plato and Christ. It seems almost like a gold-rush - an excitement in which many spiritual and intellectual human potentialities were seemingly discovered for the first time. There are various theories as to why the Axial Age happened when it did. Perhaps it was something to do with the move to agrarian settlement and the

growth of civilisations - perhaps it came about because humanity was in a new situation.

We can take inspiration from the Axial Age, and preserve a sense of mystery about what human nature is. Today we are faced by some big threats, but also great opportunities. This is the first time in human history we have been aware that we are threatening the life support systems of the Earth itself. It's a new situation for humanity, and whilst our response could turn out to be deeply negative, it could also turn out to be deeply positive. We might discover that we are more than we thought we were.

The industrial growth society and its associated neoliberal worldview, which came to being first in Europe, is not the best possible version of human existence. In fact, it is looking in many ways like an anthropocentric cul-de-sac which the human race needs to get out of. Unlike earlier generations, we can see what our lifestyle is doing to the planet, and what neoliberal capitalism is doing to our societies. We are in a position to critique the stories our society is based on, and to devise new stories. But in doing so, we need to consider that these stories have also formed, or at least strongly influenced, ourselves personally.

Philosophically and spiritually, knowing ourselves has long been held to be one of the hardest things to do, and potentially one of the greatest achievements. It's good to reflect that we don't fully know ourselves - either personally or as a species. Which means that we don't know what we are capable of. We can transform the world as well as ourselves: and I want to suggest that techniques and perspectives from the Buddhist tradition could help us do that – both in principle and in more practical terms.

The rest of this book explores further what Buddhist responses might be in principle, and in more practical terms – and offers some resources. Given that in principle Buddhism responds to suffering with compassionate action, perhaps all forms of Buddhist practice down the ages are to be celebrated in this sense - from the ascetic, solitary practice and realisation of Milarepa in 12th century Tibet, to contemporary uses of Buddhism to treat addicts in recovery. Bearing in mind the principles of Buddhism, and the rich tradition of Buddhist compassionate action, if

neoliberal capitalism leads to suffering, perhaps Buddhists have a duty or legitimate responsibility to challenge that system. This can be a real spiritual practice, of transforming self and world, in collaboration with others.

3. BUDDHIST RESPONSES IN PRINCIPLE: PROBLEMS AND WAYS FORWARD

The situation right now - and Buddhist responses in principle

Particularly in the USA and Europe, things have got more extreme in recent years. Big business is less concerned about hiding its domination of politics. Right-wing leaders in a number of countries are subtly or overtly stoking popular discontent (originating in the social inequality brought about by years of neoliberal austerity measures) - and directing it into racist scapegoating. At the same time, climate change is already exacerbating conflicts and creating more refugees¹. There seems to be no restraining principle within the driving forces of neoliberalism – they just carry on doing what they do. And there is a relationship between neoliberalism, far-right politics, and the crushing of dissent. Theresa May is friendly with Donald Trump, who has an affinity with Vladimir Putin. Dissent is not tolerated in Russia or Turkey, and nor are modern, free-thinking forms of Buddhism – which are seen as similar to dissent².

At the same time, broadly progressive campaigning groups and political parties are certainly fighting back. And there does appear to be a growing realisation that neoliberal economics and its associated worldview just don't work. There is great potential for politicians such as Donald Trump to use natural disasters, terrorist attacks or wars to declare states of emergency and use the shock and confusion to push through extreme neoliberal policies. But times of disruption could also be opportunities for broad-based progressive movements (like Podemos in Spain) to initiate positive system change.

So what might Buddhist responses to the present times look like in principle? Surely Buddhism would uphold the ideals of compassion and wisdom, would favour sharing resources, social inclusion and not exclusion, co-operation, and harmony. It would oppose a culture of greed and mindless consumption, it would favour a humane and sane relationship with the natural world, and a building of social resilience in the face of climate change. It would seem likely that Buddhism wouldn't necessarily fit with any one political party, partly because political parties start from different worldviews and values. Buddhism doesn't set out a programme of how society might be improved in practical terms, but offers a path of individual and collective spiritual growth and realisation.

This third chapter starts by taking a look at neoliberalism at a deeper level. Neoliberalism does have important psychological and cultural aspects. It even has its own mythology and fictions (for example Ayn Rand's novel Atlas Shrugged, or the film The Wolf on Wall Street). To some extent it is like a religion: in its blind faith in the beneficent power of the 'free' market, and in its fervent celebration of commercial power and success. If neoliberalism had an ethics, it would hold that successful business is the supreme good. Everything else is either bad, or significant only as far as it serves business. How does neoliberalism affect our culture and our minds – how does it influence our behaviour, and even what we want to do with our lives? Next follows a consideration of Buddhism itself, how in its essence it presents profound challenges to neoliberal values: how we need to be clear about these differences and confidently assert alternative values. Lastly, this chapter looks at some of the difficulties facing people trying to practise Buddhism in a significantly neoliberal world, before sketching out many ways Buddhist practice can help to transform society.

The neoliberal worldview at deeper levels

In terms of the history of ideas, perhaps neoliberalism's inheritance is the Judaeo-Christian worldview, followed by Protestantism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, with the death of God followed by the 'end of history' (meaning the collapse of communism and the rise of neoliberalism to global dominance). So this means that Neoliberal Man is embedded in his own rationalistic subjectivity, looks down on his body and emotions, is centre of the universe, both rightful lord and technological master of the natural world, and has become God. He is extremely likely to be

white. The occasional exceptional Neoliberal Woman might rise to power – but neoliberal culture is essentially macho, and dominated by rich men.

Some thinkers on modern consumerist society see a massive assertion of (or immersion in) subjectivity³. This entails a denial of death, a denial of impermanence, and a denial of the Other (meaning anyone or anything that seems different or challenging to the self in some way). This worldview looks down on inability, uncertainty, hesitation or any kind of vulnerability - and is not interested in mystery, wisdom or spirituality. All this backed up, in the case of the wealthy countries, by huge economic and military power. Essentially, the neoliberal worldview offers a seductive vision of power and control. 'I am what matters - or what is mine, or people who are on my side. I'll get what I want, or ruthlessly use power until I get it. If the world isn't the way I want it to be, I'll flatten it out until it is.' It has strong affinity with the macho male gender identity, disrespects people of different sexual orientations or gender identities, women, and people of colour. It is human - but a very narrow and unpleasant aspect of humanity.

One of the most radical aspects of both ecopsychology and antineoliberal philosophy is to challenge this hugely influential worldview, and to assert that Man is not at the centre of the universe. That the natural world is in fact more powerful than us, and has its own reality which we need to reckon with. Neoliberalism fosters an extractivist attitude – just grabbing whatever we want from the natural world, with little regard for its (or our) wellbeing. But this attitude of rationalistic, technological mastery of the natural world impoverishes us spiritually and psychologically. We deny our own need to revere beauty and life itself. And, contrary to the mindset behind geoengineering (the idea of fixing the planet's living systems by technological intervention) - there might be something we depend upon which can't be fixed.

The neoliberal worldview has many effects in modern culture and society. There is the cult of youth and looking young – therefore invulnerable. There's consumerism: buying new things and throwing them away quickly (whereupon they just disappear from view, with no consequences). There's the commodification of desire, love and spirituality. There's the Hollywood film industry (dominated by white men), flattening out other cultures into just slightly exotic (and impotent) versions of itself. Neoliberal culture, which values having over being, appearance over reality,

superficiality over depth - tends to hollow people out and make them fundamentally lonely. It's a culture which constantly aspires to the happy ending of a Hollywood film - a perfect endlessness of triumphant Self. A culture which is therefore profoundly unhealthy and even, to a significant extent, suicidal.

Opposition between Buddhism and neoliberalism

The Buddha showed that there is a path of personal transformation and spiritual development, starting from wherever we are, and leading all the way to a profound insight into the nature of things – known as Enlightenment. He taught that this is something of supreme value, and that we can all do this, we can all change - becoming ever wiser, kinder, more self-aware.

The Buddha's teaching is like a very large toolkit, with many insights and practices, which cater for many different human psychological types and where someone is at in their life. They all have one flavour, which is liberation from our own greed, hatred and delusion – and growing into ever greater compassion and wisdom. But there is a great principle which runs through all these practices, which could be expressed as: 'we become the story we tell ourselves, we become what we place our heart and mind upon, we become what we do'. Here are the first two verses of the Dhammapada⁴

'Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox (drawing the cart).

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.'

Neoliberalism has many aspects, but from the point of view of Buddhism, neoliberalism is primarily a manifestation of greed, hatred and delusion. In fact, classical Buddhist images of worldly existence seem appropriate to the negative aspects of capitalist consumerist society. Buddhism sees a world on fire - populated by people who tend to see things the wrong way up (the impermanent as permanent, the unreal as real, the painful as pleasant, the spiritually ugly as

beautiful). A world in which an angry person, when seen with wisdom, seems to be tightly holding a burning coal.

Neoliberalism implies a rather crude and essentialist view of human nature, and of what life is all about. That we are fundamentally selfish - and that the only significant differences between us are how strong, ruthless, talented or cunning we are. Buddhism has a more accurate model of reality: that everything arises from a multiplicity of conditions, and that everything is impermanent and changeable, including human conditioning. That we are influenced by greed, hatred, and spiritual delusion – but still very much capable of achieving our highest human potential. So Buddhism acknowledges the shadows we tend to be influenced by, but asserts that wisdom and compassion are in fact more grounded in reality. It is possible to cultivate these qualities (rather than greed or hatred), and this will bring us closer to the way things really are. Buddhists sometimes suggest that delusion is our most important conditioning. The fundamental root problem is that we simply don't see clearly, including that we don't really see what is most important in life, or not all the time.

So Buddhism is very different to neoliberalism on what life is all about – and this includes what it means to be a human being, relating to other human beings. We do have responsibilities to each other. One of the fundamental questions, which most defines what kind of person we are, is how we respond to suffering. The neoliberal response to suffering is to try to make money from it. From the neoliberal point of view, if you are suffering and have money to pay for what you need, then you are entitled to receive help. If you don't have money, you are not entitled. Buddhism is not about making money, it's about liberating yourself from suffering, through your ethical practice – and helping others do the same.

Classical Buddhism's take on society

Canonical Buddhism doesn't really have a blueprint for society. But it has plenty to say about personal ethics, and it does have a teaching on citizenship. In the Sigalovada Sutta⁵, the Buddha is teaching a young householder (meaning someone leading an ordinary non-monastic lifestyle) how to do spiritual practice in his daily life. He takes all the most significant human relationships of this young man's life

(parents, teachers, wife and children, friends and associates, servants and employees, and ascetics and brahmins) - and tells him in practical detail how he could most positively relate to them, and them to him. In other words, the Buddha shows how the ideals of ethical practice could be realised in daily life.

This might seem undramatic - but it is very significant. The Buddha is saying that we don't wait for retreat time before we do our spiritual practice of ethics - we do it right here, right now, in our actual daily lives. Buddhism emphasises that ethical practice is the necessary foundation for our meditation practice and development of wisdom. All we really have is right now - and our human social relationships. It is profoundly different to neoliberalism in its vision of what a human being is and can be. Contrary to Margaret Thatcher's famous quote, for Buddhism there is such a thing as society. We do have responsibilities and duties in relation to the people around us, and these are essential to our spiritual practice.

The Buddha himself exemplified citizenship as spiritual practice on many occasions. It is striking that he openly opposed the caste system, which is very like neoliberalism in its greed, selfishness, social divisiveness, inherent racism and irrational assumption of entitlement. On one occasion (recorded in the Assalayana Sutta⁶), a clever Brahmin youth has heard that the Buddha opposes the caste system, and seeks him out to challenge him on this. The Buddha doesn't respond with counter-argument, statement, or assertion of superior insight. He calmly asks questions, inviting the Brahmin youth to test out the ideas behind the caste system for himself. The youth engages with the Buddha's questions, and eventually concludes for himself that the caste system is based on ungrounded and self-serving assumptions. It's a model of non-violent opposition, and speaking truth to power.

Confidently asserting positive values

It's not at all that Buddhism is in principle opposed to the modern world, or to technology, or to capitalism. But it does seem to me that Buddhism and neoliberal ideology are fundamentally opposed. Any single human being is a complex creature, but it seems reasonable to me to suspect that a basic selfishness and lack of concern for people might often be behind neoliberal policies. I'm not recommending rigid 'us versus them' position-taking, partly because that tends to arise from or to foster negative emotions - and because it tends to work against seeing clearly. The world

is indeed complex, and it's good to be as alive to that as possible. But I believe that on occasion it is wiser to take a position on something, to oppose or support something - and that refusing to take a position can sometimes be positively harmful, or an evasion of our responsibilities. Although positions need to be held lightly, with awareness of complexity, with readiness to review and revise.

It's important to be clear about how different Buddhism is, because neoliberal ideology is so pervasive and influential. In her novel Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte has Cathy talk about dreams 'that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they have gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind'. Perhaps neoliberalism is mostly an invisible omnipresence – like the air pollution it allows. But if it had a colour, it would be grey. The neoliberal worldview saturates our media, how we work, the culture we live in - and must affect our minds and our ideas, at least to some extent. Anyone questioning neoliberal orthodoxies tends to get seen as perhaps well-intentioned, but not quite adult. More idealistic or ethical options are just not discussed, or are mentioned as laudable - but not realistic. All this builds up a worldview – it tends to covertly shift the grounds of debate, and of what seems possible.

When arguing for protection of the natural world, for example, environmentalists have sometimes put their argument in pseudo-capitalist terms - as if those are the only terms an argument can be framed in. For example estimating how many billions of dollars the bees save us by pollinating crops. As if, the bees having died out, we could simply buy in some other service-provider.

Of course, it can be a good idea to use terms which might not come entirely naturally to oneself, but make sense to someone of a different worldview. To someone of more conservative persuasion, I might talk about everyone pulling together in the face of climate change, of defending our countryside, pride in our national heritage and so on (see George Marshall's excellent work on this at climateconviction.org). But putting a price tag on the natural world (for example) capitulates important values: it seems to imply that the natural world has no meaning in itself, and that we don't simply love it for its own sake, that we don't care about having to live on a broken planet.

So it's good to be clear what our values are, and that we are confidently asserting them in their own terms - not in a compromised, or perhaps half-hearted fashion. If we don't hold on to our values, they can just slip out of our lives. And when it comes to Buddhism, it's good to be clear that it has its own special magic - it is different and very precious.

Shadows in how Buddhism relates to the modern world

There are always going to be difficulties with practising an ancient religion in the modern world. Buddhism developed in such a different society to ours, that there are real problems in trying to discern what the Buddha was trying to convey. It's also very difficult not to be over-influenced by the conditionings we have inherited, and by the powerful forces around us – including the neoliberal worldview. The rest of this chapter explores some ways that the modern world might over-influence our practice of Buddhist teachings, and then outlines ways these teachings can positively influence society.

A tension between transforming self and world?

Wonderful though the above verses from the Dhammapada are, there is an important implication which isn't immediately obvious. The Buddha's teaching wasn't about just our own mental state, our own personal spiritual life. He set an example in his own life of passing on this teaching of liberation from suffering, to anyone who wanted to learn: whether monastics, householders, men, women, kings – even a serial killer. And he exhorted his followers to do the same, to go forth and spread his teachings, for the happiness and welfare of many.

There can seem to be a tension here - right at the heart of Buddhism. Buddhism is a toolkit of teachings, so we have to get hold of those tools and use them somehow. We have to do it ourselves, no-one can do it for us. But the Buddha also emphasised helping others. So it can seem like there might be a conflict between working on our own personal transformation - and doing what might be good for other people.

This apparent tension has the potential to lead us astray in our practice – subtly or not so subtly. A story from the Buddha's life illustrates this⁷. One day the Buddha is visiting a group of monks, when he comes across one monk who is very ill with dysentery. But no-one seems to be looking after him. The monk himself explains why: 'I am of no use to them'. So the Buddha gets straight down to work. He cleans up the monk, who is lying in his diarrhoea, does what needs to be done - then goes to look for the other monks. He asks them why they haven't been looking after the sick monk, and they confirm what the sick monk said. The Buddha gives them a thorough telling-off (reading between the lines).

Clearly, the monks thought they were getting on with their spiritual practice - and that did not include looking after their colleague. And clearly, the Buddha thought they were seriously misunderstanding his teaching. This story suggests that the spiritual life needs to combine both aspects: working on our own transformation, and practising ethics - in particular responding appropriately to suffering. Note 'appropriately'. The Buddha didn't say to himself: 'I'm going to respond to this man's suffering by giving a talk on ethics and wisdom - since by that means I will relieve more suffering overall'. He was able to do what physically needed to be done in the actual situation he was in, and he did it. Of course, this story itself became a great teaching – but one in which the Buddha's actions spoke louder than words.

The monks had a misunderstanding about what could help them spiritually. We can in fact very much develop spiritually through serving others - it's not just about sitting on your own meditating. So there isn't necessarily any tension at all between 'my spiritual practice' and 'responding to suffering'.

But when it comes to Buddhists trying to practise in a society dominated by neoliberal values, there is a danger that we might do what the monks did. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek might not thoroughly understand Buddhism, but he gave what could be taken as a very useful warning in his essay From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism⁸

"Western Buddhism enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game whilst sustaining the illusion that you're not really in it, that you're

well aware of how worthless this spectacle is, and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner self, to which you can always withdraw.”

The danger of over-subjectivity, in an atomised society

It is true that Buddhist mindfulness meditation and other techniques can help us relax even within busy lifestyles - and to some extent it is no bad thing to have a certain internal awareness or spaciousness. But when Margaret Thatcher said ‘there is no such thing as society’, it was perhaps as much a statement of intent, as how she saw the world. In the last 20 or 30 years society has become more atomised, more individualistic, more about ‘my choice’, ‘my lifestyle’. Much less about community, or having to get along with people. There are many symptoms of this. A study for the BBC in the UK in 2008 showed that, in the period 1971-2001, whilst incomes had on average doubled, loneliness in every region measured had increased. One of the report’s authors remarked, ‘even the weakest communities in 1971 were stronger than any community now’⁹. There’s the rise of the ‘gated community’ – streets with automatic gates which will only open to people who have the code. So the relatively wealthy don’t have to rub shoulders with the poor, or consider their perspective¹⁰. There’s the parallel pressure on public space¹¹. The decline of pubs and cuts to community services¹². The great increase in car ownership, greatly assisted by successive governments’ policy of ‘predict and provide’ - favouring road-building rather than public transport¹³. The attraction of being able to go where you want, when you want, in your own personal space, leading to huge rush-hour traffic jams, of one person per car. As Margaret Thatcher was reputed to have said: ‘a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself a failure’.

Partly we live in a post-Romantic, psychologised culture - which elevates subjective experience. We live in our own worlds. In many families, everyone has their own device to access the internet – so families don’t even come together to watch television. Whole societies don’t watch the same television programmes nearly as much as they used to. We walk down the street looking at our iPhones rather than the people around us. So when we come to practise Buddhism, there is indeed a danger that we will tend to over-emphasise ‘my practice’, ‘my mental state’ – an introverted spiritual practice which isn’t alive and responsive to what’s happening in society.

The danger of Buddhism being enmeshed with the establishment

At the institutional level too, Buddhist practice can lose its way – particularly in how it relates to suffering. Like any religion, in its history Buddhism has had its darker moments (and has some dark sides today). For example, in the Second World War, the Japanese Zen Buddhist establishment had got so enmeshed with the political establishment, that it actively supported the war effort. Zen priests blessed tanks, and some taught that it was compassionate to kill your enemy - to relieve them from their suffering¹⁴.

Buddhist practice always has some relationship with the society it is in – and it can become defined by what it doesn't oppose. It might be worth speculating on why in 2016 Vladimir Putin imposed tight restrictions on smaller religious denominations (especially targeting 'missionary activity') but allowed traditional religions, including Tibetan monastic Buddhism in Russia, to continue without interference. In 2017 a yoga teacher in Russia was charged with illegal 'missionary activity', because he gave a talk on the philosophy behind yoga¹⁵. Perhaps Putin sees modern Buddhism as an undesirable social and political influence (too much valuing of compassion and influencing society), but thinks Tibetan Buddhist monasticism politically harmless? Might he see traditional Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Russia as, in practice, manifesting a worldview which is tolerant of the feudal society it historically came from, and therefore of neoliberalism (which is essentially similar)? If so, is that a good thing?

Leaving aside Russia, at what point does 'not rocking the boat' become collusion with authoritarianism? If a Buddhist institution supports spiritual values in some ways, but not by challenging abuse of power by the political establishment, is it thereby fostering a notion of spiritual practice which works not against but with social atomisation – of meditation and ritual as a sort of opiate which helps people put up with oppression?

Other misuses of teachings

If one thinks of oneself as going against the stream of mainstream society, that might be an extremely positive thing, but that too could play into unconscious tendencies leading to misuse of teachings. Buddhism does have a critique of worldly

values: it contrasts enlightenment with worldly thinking, wisdom and compassion versus greed and hatred, ethically skilful versus unskilful. But it can be turned into a looking-down onto the world, its unskilfulness and suffering, from a falsely-superior place of calm but emotionally cold detachment from worldly (including fleshly) desires. Or Buddhists can become fatalistic about suffering - misinterpreting the doctrine of karma and rebirth as implying that when people suffer it is always because they have brought it upon themselves. Or they might see the fate of this planet as just a blip. Because traditional Buddhist cosmology holds that there are many world-systems, some people believe that when this planet ends, humans will just be reborn somewhere else - so why worry about planet Earth? Buddhists can even be suspicious of efforts to defend the natural world – when it can't be fixed because it is impermanent and ever-changing.

It's not that there's no truth at all in these ideas - but there can be drawbacks in how we relate to them. There might be elements of Christian conditioning in our attempts to practise Buddhism: possibly a valuing of mind (or soul) over body, a looking down on the merely material world, even a certain tolerance of suffering as appropriate to sinful humanity. But in a way it doesn't matter where our conditioning comes from - the important thing is that we understand ourselves, and work with whatever might be preventing us from growing.

Buddhism and society today?

If we think that Buddhism has something important to offer the world, or even that the world is in great need of its teachings - how might we offer them? If we want to influence society, how might we set about that? Here are brief sketches of three broad approaches: personal, collective and activist – which will be explored in more detail later.

Sangharakshita has a story which might be held to illustrate one approach. In 1950s India he was one of a large number of speakers at an event focussing on Buddhism and the modern world. Sangharakshita noticed a pattern: speaker after speaker would describe and analyse at some length the problems and shortcomings of the modern world, then towards the end of their speech would triumphantly bring on Buddhism, as it were. If only people would practise Buddhism, the world would be a

better place! There would be enthusiastic applause, and the speaker would sit down smiling.

Of course, what people say in a public talk might not have much to do with how they live their lives, or practise Buddhism. Sometimes a person's practice might be far more impressive than what they say about their practice. But perhaps Sangharakshita's story illustrates a pseudo-engagement with the world's problems which we can slip into: simply asserting, or simply believing, that Buddhism is the answer. Buddhist practice can help us deal with our psychological problems, in time it can help us lead more enjoyable and fulfilling lives. Having a belief system, and perhaps being part of a community of Buddhist friends, it can be easy to feel comfortable. Unconsciously, perhaps we can settle into our lives, feel a slightly condescending compassion for the world's problems, and think 'well, if people want to find peace they know where they should come'.

On the other hand: getting on with one's own practice always has an effect. It is good to have a skilful confidence about one's values and what one is doing. Someone might be setting an impressive example of making spiritual progress in their own life, perhaps teaching others too - and will in those ways be positively affecting society.

A different but related model might be trying to transform self and world through collaboratively and actively spreading the Buddhist teachings. Offering courses and classes in meditation and Buddhism, running retreats, publishing books, giving talks, writing articles - advertising and promoting awareness of Buddhism, making it accessible and reasonably user-friendly. A practitioner can be working on developing themselves, but not just in an internal or secluded kind of way. Working with other practitioners in facing the internal and external challenges of teaching or offering these teachings.

This might be called a gradualist model of transforming society: a tree root can crack a pavement, given enough time. This model is not about directly influencing the policies and systems of society. But if carried on long enough, just increasing the number of Buddhists in the population will eventually have effect. There are of course, potentially problems with this model too. Any community of Buddhists

whose main focus is essentially creating more Buddhists is at risk of becoming overly inward-looking, unhealthily self-affirming and triumphalist. Perhaps those are dangers for any group that has a critique of mainstream society - it can become separated from society, a little citadel of people who affirm each other.

There is a third model, or perhaps group of approaches - which certainly overlap with first two models, especially the second. And that is trying to influence society more directly, particularly on issues where we might (individually or collectively) disagree with whatever is going on. Without going back over ground covered in chapter 2, Buddhists might well disagree with social policies which end up harming human beings, or compromising the biosphere. So this might include a huge range of social and ecological issues - at local, national or global levels. And there are very many ways in which Buddhists could attempt to promote systemic change, including by building positive alternatives. As with the first two models, this is another way of attempting to working on self and world at the same time, two aspects of one spiritual practice.

This more activist approach might take the form of speaking one's mind, of skilfully expressing challenge or disagreement, of offering dialogue. As with the first two models, there are potential dangers or possible dark sides - particularly of getting angry, or burnt-out. But it would clearly involve trying to practise the speech precepts, and would, of course, be distinctly non-violent. The aim would be to bring spiritual practice into the activist situation - to speak out, breaking the neoliberal silence, and to confidently assert spiritual values in their own terms.

The Buddha and his times

The Buddha himself seems to have very much not avoided the 'hot' issues of his time. Reading the Suttas, it's striking how often he is disagreeing with brahmins in particular, and engaging in vigorous debate - though of course highly skilfully. The Buddha didn't just exemplify, he embodied peace - yet he was anything but a pushover. It appears that he could on occasion speak very plainly and forcefully - for example when he rebukes his monks for being inappropriately noisy (Catuma Sutta¹⁶). On one occasion the Buddha got involved in a most intense political situation - two tribes about to go to war over water rights. His skilful mediation helped to defuse the situation (Kunala Jataka number 536). Again, it's hard to

imagine a more direct (and courageous) challenge to social injustice than cogently questioning the caste system (as in the Assalayana Sutta above).

The Buddha certainly didn't just get on with his own spiritual practice in an introverted kind of way. Nor did he confine himself to teaching meditation, ethics and wisdom. He responded to situations he found himself in, drawing on his spiritual insight - which included being very politically outspoken. It seems the Buddha met a very large number of people, from all kinds of backgrounds - including kings and their ministers, on a number of occasions. He managed to speak profound spiritual truth to power, to show that there was a perspective, and lived experience, which had the potential to transform self and world.

PART TWO: WHAT CAN WE DO?

4. PERSONAL LIFESTYLE CREATIVITY

Sustaining vision, unleashing imagination

It's hard to imagine a more depressing or scarier society than Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s. Anyone with a trace of independent thinking or talent could be seen as a threat to the regime - and hundreds of thousands of such people were killed or sent to labour camps. There could be great pressure to denounce your friends before they might denounce you. Free speech or dissent was almost non-existent, and a satirical poem about Stalin could get you killed, as it seems effectively happened to Osip Mandelstam¹.

In this situation, Mikhail Bulgakov wrote The Master and Margarita². It tells the story of what happens when the devil visits the fervently atheistic Soviet Union, and is hard to summarise. A very knowing and witty parody of Soviet society, wildly carnivalesque, full of magic, religion, good versus evil, and the romantic. Hard to know exactly what would have happened if Bulgakov had tried to publish (as he intended), since he died of natural causes (in 1940) as he was finishing it. But this book lived well beyond its creator – secretly passed from hand to hand, it was known and loved by many thousands of Russians.

One serious point here is about fun and play - and perhaps danger. Bulgakov's novel is a great achievement of the human imagination just in itself, but even more so given the situation it was written in, and in a way against. Many serious political points and criticisms could be read into it, and perhaps were intended - but it is also wild. It is great fun, a celebration of some of the wilder human energies - play for its own sake. When faced with authoritarianism, all the positive human qualities matter, but perhaps this energy and wild, magical vision are particularly valuable. Laughter is so opposite to cowed and fearful. Mikhail Bakhtin on Rabelais could be relevant to Bulgakov: 'Laughter must liberate the gay truth of the world from the veils of gloomy lies spun by the seriousness of fear, suffering and violence'³. Bulgakov had great vision - not of some blueprint for how soviet society should be, but perhaps of what it was denying, and needed.

Some more recent progressivist activism does something analagous (in its own way) to Bulgakov's carnivalesque resistance. For example at the Seattle World Trade Organisation protest in 1999, there were 'Pink Blocs' of people dressed in tutus armed with feather dusters for tickling the police. And the Buddhist tradition has its own wild and playful sides. One of many examples (from the Tibetan Vajrayana in this case) is Vajrayogini. She's a sort of archetypal Enlightened deity figure, representing something important about our potential. She has the form of a beautiful young woman, naked apart from a few symbolic bone implements. Her skin is red, the colour of unconditional, universal loving-kindness. She's ecstatic and free, dancing in the sheer void of ultimate reality - sometimes she's represented as dancing on (or trampling) bodies representing greed, hatred and delusion. She takes no prisoners. If we dare to dance with her (perhaps by engaging in years of spiritual

practice) she will destroy us utterly - and make us into something far beyond what we were.

The far-right is uncomfortably close to dominance in the USA and Europe, and we may well be on the unstoppable ride of runaway climate change. In some ways, things are looking even grimmer than in Bulgakov's lifetime. Hopefully, things politically won't go too far in that direction. On the other hand it seems worth considering that one day we might need to think in terms of resistance rather than opposition - of keeping spiritual vision alive in covert forms, like bulbs in the ground surviving winter.

If we're going to face the big picture, respond positively and sustain creative changes in our daily lives, we're going to need inspiration and emotional sustenance. How we might do this in practice is probably very personal to us. Obviously, we can find inspiration in our friendships and relationships, in what we are doing, and in other people's work that we get to hear about. But it might be helpful to deliberately cultivate more symbolic, non-rational sources of inspiration - perhaps there are parts of us which can only be reached this way. Some people find Buddhist devotional practices such as chanting or visualising figures (similar to Vajrayogini) to be very effective indeed - whilst leaving other people cold. Some people find inspiration through engaging in the arts, or the natural world - or through study and reflection. Maybe the most important thing is that we recognise how important this is for us in the long term - we find something that really does reach us at this level, that inspires us and helps keep us going.

Facing the big picture

In the first part of this book we looked at some of the forces - including social, political, cultural and economic - which have brought us to where we are now. As we saw in chapter 3 there might be a danger with any spiritual practice, but perhaps particularly with Buddhism and meditation, of withdrawing too much from mundane reality. But it's good to recall that we are literally part of the world, and of history, and are partly shaped by these forces. Also that any form of Buddhism we practise or are interested in will have been influenced by these forces too. Even someone on a minimum wage in a wealthy country such as the UK is, globally speaking, one of a

lucky minority living in relative safety and luxury. But that material privilege of the high-carbon lifestyle partly comes out of (historically speaking) some extreme ethical negatives - such as colonial exploitation and racism. And those historical factors very much underpin contemporary economic and political realities - including global warming and who it affects most.

When we look at ourselves and our lifestyles, all that can seem overwhelming. Especially if we think about, and perhaps find out about, just where our clothes, our phones, our food (for example) come from. How they are made or cultivated, by whom, working under what conditions, how they get to us⁴. If we consider the ecological consequences of our travel choices, for example, or of the vast infrastructure that underpins almost everything we do. If we look into the very ethically compromised political and economic systems which seem essential to make all that work - it can seem endless and depressing.

It seems there's a real quandary here. Turning to look at this can make us downhearted - but not looking at it might also not be good for us. We might be feeling that the world situation requires more from us than getting on with our personal spiritual practice and voting every few years. That there's an ethical imperative to get more directly involved in the political situation, and to help society prepare for climate change - that we really shouldn't be leaving these things to the politicians and corporations. What will happen to our spiritual practice if we ignore these feelings? Ecopsychology suggests that we are living a lifestyle which tends to disconnect us from the natural world, and from awareness of the consequences of our decisions. But we are nevertheless to some extent, and uneasily, aware of this disconnect. We are to some extent aware that we are living a lifestyle that is destructive of the biosphere, that the modern way of life needs to change and use considerably less resources - but what are we doing about it?

We'll look at all this in more spiritual and psychological detail in chapter 5. But for now I'd suggest that these issues are very interconnected, and the good news is that bringing all this into our personal spiritual practice can make us more deeply and sustainably happy. There is light at the end of this tunnel! Looking at what is happening in the natural and human worlds can make us feel all kinds of things, including rage, distress and hopelessness. But if we engage wisely and with self-

awareness, we can connect with the source of those feelings - our deep positive emotions and love.

So how might we do this practically, in how we live our lives and engage with Buddhism?

What is wealth and wellbeing?

Perhaps one of the ways neoliberalism affects our personal lives most intimately is consumerism. Here are some ways we might investigate, and perhaps re-vision, our personal economic lives using Buddhist perspectives.

As we saw in chapter 2, one story we are being told is that constant and endless economic growth is necessary for a society's wellbeing. In order to keep that growth going, we are being encouraged to consume more and more of the latest new thing - and to literally buy into the notion that consuming more will make us happy. And this ends up being competitive – our sense of social status and self-worth tend to get tied to how 'well' we think we are doing compared to our peers. And this all has many physical effects in the real world - it's not just an economic, psychological or social phenomenon. On average, personal carbon footprint in wealthy countries is still drifting upwards⁵. On average, we are getting more obese,⁶ we fly more,⁷ drive cars more,⁸ use more energy⁹, are more likely to live alone or with fewer people¹⁰ and so on. One might expect Buddhists to be leading the way in moving towards low-impact living, and many of us are. Or are we more part of the trend towards increasing resource use than we would like to be?

It has become increasingly well-known that these stories – which surely affect us - are simply not true. As we saw in chapter 2, studies have shown that more neoliberal societies (such as the USA and UK) have worse (and worsening) social problems. Once basic needs are met, increasing wealth and consumption is generally not matched by increasing personal happiness.

Buddhism and material possessions

What has Buddhism to say about all this in relation to us personally? The Buddha's message in relation to wealth and possessions is hardcore but liberating. Again and again, he extolled radical simplicity of lifestyle - going forth from the household life,

becoming a wandering mendicant owning almost nothing - dedicated to achieving Enlightenment for the welfare of all beings. He advocated spiritual wealth, you might say.

We might not wish to become wandering mendicants just yet, and this was a recommendation made in a very specific cultural context - but it was based on a principle of spiritual development. It's not that wealth itself is intrinsically bad, or that being wealthy is incompatible with practising ethics or developing spiritually. But we tend to get emotionally attached to what we own, and the more we own the more attached we seem to get. Even unconsciously, we tend to build up our egos around our possessions, whilst the culture and society we live in might reinforce this sense of status. The world has undoubtedly changed, but as a psychological and spiritual principle, maybe this is as true today as it was in 500BC.

Terms like 'ego' and 'attachment' might seem ethically neutral or at least relatively harmless - but there is good evidence that the more we have, the less generous and compassionate we tend to be. Poorer people in fact tend to be more generous (they give away a higher proportion of their income than wealthy people)¹¹. Psychologically, we tend to close around what we possess, to identify ourselves with our possessions - to fear them being taken from us, to get angrily defensive around them. And to want more. This is partly why many unimaginably-wealthy people today (almost all of them are men) would be very unhappy at higher rates of taxation. They would have trouble spending what they own even in several lifetimes, but still compare themselves to other wealthy people, and strive to become richer than them.

All of which isn't to say that we shouldn't look after ourselves, or enjoy ourselves. But moving in the direction of mindful and creative simplicity might in reality help us to be healthier, happier, and more self-fulfilled. As we let go of things, maybe we relax more deeply, become a little bit more generous, a little bit happier. From an ecological perspective too, there tends to be a very strong correlation between personal wealth and carbon footprint¹². The lower our income, the less negative impact we tend to have on the Earth, and that can affect how we feel about ourselves. Cultivating simplicity of lifestyle is a way of moving closer to the spiritual ideal of loving-kindness and non-harming.

We are born into a certain level of wealth, in which a certain level of consuming seems just normal. Some of us will have responsibilities which we need to honour. But when we look at the big picture, that sense of normality needs some questioning. So, within the commitments we have, and without being harsh with ourselves or those close to us, we might want to move at least in some ways towards a simpler lifestyle. That could include consuming less or differently in many ways - both large and small. Or we might decide to earn less money, perhaps allowing us to spend our time more creatively. And we could choose to see this as a progressive path of deepening simplicity - hopefully with corresponding increases of contentment and happiness.

Going deeper with spiritual life and simplicity

There is a great deal to be said just for being alive (and healthy, if one is fortunate enough to be so). Many of the best things in life are indeed free, and simple. If you knew you definitely only had a few more hours or minutes to live, what would you most regret losing? What images would flash into your mind, of this life you're about to leave? Maybe your mind would turn towards the people you most love, or have loved. Maybe you would be filled with a desire simply to live. Perhaps just living, just experiencing life, might seem an amazing thing, and infinitely precious.

Sure, it's hard to live one's life under the aspect of eternity. But a near-death experience, or suffering the death of a loved one, can make us re-assess what is most important to us. Life can take us towards certain deeper realities and precious truths - and they can also be approached through reflection. If something like this has already happened to us, we might have realised (at least for a while), that the most important thing in life is love.

Practices like meditation, reflection, ethics, spiritual friendship, going on retreat, solitude - all these can help bring these truths more fully into our lives. And as we live more in the really important things - love, beauty, truth, peace and so on - we become more deeply happy, and find crudely consumerist habits tend to naturally die away. The spiritual life itself is partly about seeing what's really important, and drawing nourishment from it. The more we value the important things, the more we will naturally tend towards simplicity in our lifestyle. But we can also use this

principle in spiritual practice: reducing or giving things up can help us to draw nourishment from what is really important.

Now that might sound a little boring. But over the years, personally, I've found this to be a truly magical process. I've cultivated the important things in many ways, especially through communication with people, through relationships, through intensive living and working with people. And solitary retreats for me have been another way of practising simplicity. No conversation, or access to the internet, perhaps no reading, though maybe doing some writing. Just meditating or reflecting, and doing devotional rituals - for up to four months. I do find it challenging, I do get restless, it is hard work sometimes. But over the years, practising simplicity in different ways has been a little bit like Aladdin's lamp. As if I've again and again polished the lamp, a genie has come out, and given me access to real adventures and riches. I've learned about myself, and other people, and changed. I feel more deeply alive than I used to, my heart feels more open and able to love.

Through meditation, reflection, practising ethics and enjoying spiritual friendship we cherish our ideals of wisdom and loving-kindness - and we grow towards what we cherish. Or we change in our heart and (impermanent) soul, to put it another way. We become kinder to everyone (including ourselves). Over many years of practice, I've noticed that even one small change in my lifestyle can, over time, lead organically (and mysteriously) to other changes. For years I knew about the cruelty to animals involved in the dairy industry, and the arguments for veganism in relation to global food issues and climate change.¹³ I also knew that vegan cuisine can be seriously tasty and really easy, much more so than many meat-eaters think. But still - I really loved cheese, just found it extremely hard to give up, and imagined that would always be impossible. But after years of trying it out and thinking about it, quite suddenly one day it was natural and easy to go vegan. So for me that meant hummus or peanut butter rather than cheese, great-tasting soy or oat milk rather than cow milk on cereals - and excellent vegan recipes from all over the world.

More political aspects of lifestyle

By moving away from consumerism, by living more lightly on the Earth, by trying to live our spiritual values more fully, we are also embodying resistance to the political and economic status quo. Put another way, we are taking our money and energy away from supporting neoliberal values and systems.

Of course, unless we are completely off-grid, growing our own food, never using modern roads or medical care or materials like plastic etc - we will be engaging with and supported by systems we might be to some extent opposed to or critical of. So what? It's OK to have criticisms of the system one is part of. And one might have admiration and respect for people living the hunter-gatherer lifestyle - but one doesn't need to have a near-zero carbon footprint to be legitimately concerned about the world, and its politics.

When we need to shop, we can try to shop more ethically. (There are resources to help us do this, such as ethicalconsumer.com). Rather than buying the cheapest coffee available, we could buy Fairtrade coffee. The growers will still be paid very little for their long hours of hard work, but at least they get a slightly better deal. We can take our custom away from corporations like Walmart/Asda, who seem to treat their workers particularly badly¹⁴. We can take our savings away from banks like HSBC and Barclays which invest in fossil fuel extraction (for example)¹⁵. Instead we can use ethical banks like Triodos - which operate responsibly and invest in green initiatives. Some people set themselves a target of giving a certain portion of their income (maybe even 10%) to causes they feel strongly about, and feel this enriches them. Of course, what is easy for one person might be hard for another. For someone keen on fashion, but with a low income, it might be hard to completely give up frequently buying (and then throwing away) cheap new clothes.

Practical aspects of low-carbon lifestyle as spiritual practice

There are many whole books on how one might change one's lifestyle to have a lighter impact on the Earth, and on the political and spiritual questions that raises - so here are just a few ideas and reflections.

For long-term emotional sustainability, it might be better to think of all this in terms of deepening contentment and happiness, rather than as simply giving things up or making do with less. Or one might think of it in terms of exploration or trying

something new. Going on holiday in the country you live in (rather than abroad) might be a revelation of richness, beauty and cultural depth - rather than a restriction. Similarly for long train journeys rather than flying. But of course, we like what we like, and don't like what we don't like. It's good to be honest about how one really feels, to not be over-ambitious and get carried away with enthusiasms which might provoke an internal backlash later. We need to be patient with what we might see as our bad habits, not to be too hard on ourselves, and, if possible, to make sure we are in fact enjoying our life. But a simple lower-carbon decision - like drying your clothes outdoors rather than using a lot of electricity with a tumble-dryer - might just make us feel happier.

Practically speaking, there are many areas where we might be able to choose to live more lightly on the Earth. We might be able to use less energy by insulating our homes, think again about the transport choices we make, try to buy more local organically-grown food. There are many small decisions we make where we could bear in mind the ideal of 'reduce, re-use, re-cycle'. But there are also the big decisions - what job we apply for, where we live, how we live, what kind of place we live in. It's great to live in a beautiful low-impact eco-home with a ground-source heat pump - but even better if the house has a number of people in it, rather than just one or two.

In this context, there's something to be said for spending time close to the natural world, whether on retreat or not. Particularly an extended time, if possible - experiencing the natural world more on its own terms. If you're reading this book, you probably already care very much about what is happening to the Earth. But many of us were born into a lack of connection with the natural world. David Loy has suggested¹⁶ that this might be behind humanity's overall lack of response to the threat of global warming. It's good to realise at a deeper level how much we are part of the same great web of conditionality. This might be challenging to our egos in various ways, and to our unconscious self-importance as human beings - but also deeply nourishing. More on this in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

There's also the question of how we spend our time, and who with. We could think in terms of contributing to a new kind of society, one which will be more compassionate and also more resilient to climate change. Even talking to and

getting to know our neighbours helps promote social cohesion – and communities with more social cohesion are more resilient to the natural shocks that climate change will make more frequent. We could think about the area we live in - perhaps choosing to shop at small businesses which might be struggling against competition from the corporations. In relation to entertainment, we could more often do things with other people (joining a choir, playing in a team etc) - rather than watching a film in our bedroom on our own (if that's what we do). Even entertainment has a carbon footprint, has an effect on us personally, and on the kind of society we live in. On the other hand, I think many people could do with more time of being alone and not doing anything – in a self-nurturing way. Certainly, people's needs vary considerably from each other, and change over time. But living more according to these values and in these ways will probably make us happier, as well as positively affecting the world around us.

Knowledge and engagement

When thinking about our lives in relation to the bigger picture, there's an important point to consider about knowledge and engagement. The global political-economic situation and climate change - not to mention the spiritual life - are vast and hugely complex realities. We probably don't have time to become expert about even one tiny aspect. Many contemporary Buddhists are thoughtful people, who tend to see clearly how complex things are, and how difficult it is to be sure about anything. That respect for complexity, and readiness to see both sides of an argument, are great strengths - but they can also become an excuse for non-engagement. We don't need absolute certainty to take a line on something, or express an opinion. Yes, that does expose us to the possibility that we might sometimes be misinformed or make a mistake - that we might need to change our mind, or even apologise. But all that's part of being involved in life, part of seeing our responsibilities to each other more clearly. It's good to ask questions, to try to find things out, to reflect and debate. But when things are going on, not taking a line can be an ethical failure.

We could set aside time – such as one evening a week - to finding out about these political, ecological and spiritual areas. Through reflection and dialogue with friends working out what we think, how we feel and how we want to respond. Perhaps

finding something (whether at local, national, or global level) we feel passionate about, and which we'd be happy to give some time to long-term. There are so many ways to work for a more compassionate society which will be more resilient to climate change.

Things like: encouraging the local council to divest from fossil fuels, supporting low-income people from being forced out of their homes due to gentrification, opposing fracking, supporting the rights of trans-gender people - and so on.

All that might sound like hard work and intense. But engaging more directly and pushing for systemic change can be easier than not engaging so directly. These issues are probably on our minds, and maybe sapping our energy to some extent. Facing them more directly and speaking out can actually be a relief. Doing those things with like-minded friends can be both heart-opening and deeply inspiring.

Going against the stream: internally and externally

A word of warning - it's only when we move away from habitual ways of being and seeing the world that we come to realise how strong these forces are. For example, I think of myself as someone who doesn't care about status. Which to some extent is true. Nowadays I love my work. But when I started doing care work (which in the UK is low-paid and low-status) I was surprised to find myself having obscure feelings of regret. And I noticed these feelings were almost exclusively in my own mind - and certainly not coming from the people immediately in my life.

With any of these kind of lifestyle changes, it's good to consider how much we are going against the stream of what is around us. Neoliberal messages are so very pervasive and subtly present in modern culture, that we will have unconsciously internalised them to some extent. We need to be very clear about what our values are, that they are different - and that we really are behind them. That will make us feel isolated sometimes, since we're not going with the flow, not subtly downplaying ideals with irony, or with a pseudo-adult knowingness masking a neoliberal perspective. On occasion we will need to be clear that we're trying to base our life on love and ethics - and be ready to speak or act accordingly. We will need to make sure that we stay emotionally nourished and consciously in touch with our

spiritual ideals - we will need time with our friends. We might even need to find new friends, or new allies.

5. TRANSFORMING SELF AND WORLD: DEEPER ISSUES AND RESOURCES

What happens in us when we look at the political and ecological crisis (or indeed at suffering in general) - and try to do something about it? We might have some kind of plan or goal - are there factors, whether within ourselves or within society, that get in our way?

This chapter starts from the assumption that you are inspired to respond in some way to the state of the world - whether that is strictly within the sphere of your own lifestyle and spiritual practice, or working with others perhaps through your local Buddhist group, or in a more activist setting. It mainly looks at issues that might arise within us, and some strategies that might help. But almost always, the issues we face within ourselves also manifest in society in general - so the work we do to transform ourselves is very relevant to transforming the world.

We are influenced by many stories. Some come from our society and culture, and others from our personal conditioning – and some of them are false, or at least questionable. We embody stories about how much we are lovable, for example. We hold stories about who we are, and our relationship with society and the natural world – which derive partly from psychoanalytic models. We are moved by stories about what is valuable or worthy, told to us by the arts. Perhaps if we became more aware of, saw through, and started to move away from the false or unhelpful stories that influence our lives - we would become very different people. But what stories do we want to move towards, what kind of people do we want to become? What world are we trying to create?

Views and self-knowledge

The Buddhist notion of views might be a helpful place to start in looking at all this. A view is an idea with emotions behind it, which drives us. We might be conscious of it, or completely unconscious, but it affects or determines our behaviour. A friend is cooking a meal for a few people tonight - I've bought some chocolate to bring along and offer as dessert. But, as I'm watching a film in my bedroom, I'm overcome with desire for chocolate. After a short but not intense struggle with myself, I decide that there's time to go out and buy some more, and eat the whole bar.

So I started with ideas, and feelings – a fantasy or scenario. A view of the world in which giving chocolate to my friends was a good thing to do, and would give pleasure to me. My friends would enjoy the chocolate, be grateful to me, and admire my discerning choice. I would take pleasure in their pleasure, and in their approval of me. But all that got overtaken by another scenario in which I was stuffing myself with chocolate. Probably all kinds of views drive us or affect us, with all kinds of emotions behind them - from altruistic to selfish. They change with time - for example I have different priorities now as an adult than I had as a child (or not!). They often seem culturally and historically determined - in 19th century England, a middle or upper-class father might have been shocked if his son didn't address him as 'sir'. A son calling his father 'sir' was just a custom. But a father might have had the view that a son not calling his father 'sir' meant that his son didn't respect (or love) him - hence the response of shock, hurt, anger and so on.

Views are tied up with identity and conditioning - my views make me what I am or the other way round. Using myself as an example: I'm white, male, born in England (Birmingham), middle-class. My father was a Methodist minister, my mother a Quaker and probation officer. Sure, I've chosen to practise Buddhism - but I can't somehow float free of my historical origins and completely refashion myself. My cultural, social and religious conditioning, my worldview, my ideas of what is attractive or not, valuable or not – affect what I am, and want to be! You could say I'm a white, male, Protestant Methodist etc etc Buddhist.

There are all kinds of views which we might hold unconsciously, or which we might consciously reject but which nevertheless affect us. Some examples: the natural world is there for us to make use of just as we like, the world is a hostile place,

people are fundamentally selfish and out to get what they can, shopping will make me happy. Maybe our lives are influenced by views which make us unhappy, such as 'I am unlovable', or 'it's all hopeless'. Maybe some of these views, these stories we are telling ourselves, are just not true - and it would be good to work on seeing through them.

The ideals we hold come only from a part of our mind or heart. We might find ourselves making choices which conflict with our ideals - because we are affected by conflicting views and associated emotions. The good news is that all our views will change, since everything does - and that there are many ways to transform them in the direction we want.

But in order to transform our views, we need to know who we are - or what our views are at a deep level - a task which is almost as big as the spiritual life itself. We need practices which will help us know ourselves, and which will connect us with ourselves more thoroughly.

Body-work and emotions

One of the side-effects of the consumerist society is a tendency to subtle emotional alienation. I think this is actually hard to avoid: modern life is too fast, we spend too much time looking at computers, we're probably somewhat out of touch with the natural world, ourselves and each other. So that sometimes means we just don't know so well what we are feeling - at these moments we are relatively out of touch with our emotions. The development of whole-body-awareness seems very helpful in cultivating awareness of emotions. There has been much emphasis in Buddhist circles over the last 20 years or so on the importance of body-awareness for this reason. But in practice this often seems to boil down to deliberately cultivating body-awareness whilst setting up for meditation. Which is certainly good practice - but some kind of regular body-work practice, in addition to meditation, would be a really good idea for many people. Yoga or tai chi - but almost any kind of bodily exercise, so long as it is done with plenty of awareness (and with a good teacher to start with).

It's easy to pay lip-service to the ideal of 'body-awareness' as an aid to 'emotional integration' (becoming truly and directly aware of our emotions). But this kind of

awareness, or lack of it, affects everything about our lives. And there are degrees of emotional awareness - we can be more or less aware of what we're feeling, of the subtleties and complexities of our motivations. That means, crucially, we can be more or less aware of what we really want - of what we long for. That affects our big and small decisions: what we choose to do, who we spend time with, how we look after ourselves - and how we live out our ideals.

Ways of working on ourselves

So we're trying to become aware of all the different aspects of ourselves: unconscious and conscious, heights and depths, things we like about ourselves or don't like. Of course, meditation can help with this (see chapter 6) - as can thorough and honest reflection, and transparent communication with good friends who are also trying to grow and develop. Also, in this project of finding out about ourselves, situations which put us under pressure can be really helpful. What we don't like, fear, or feel uncomfortable with can tell us so much about ourselves - or unleash new energies.

Of course, it's important to hold all this with kindness, with self-acceptance and positive self-love - to make wise and appropriate effort, to not push ourselves too hard or be overly ambitious. Positive change can be dramatic: it can be as if blood, or emotional life, is suddenly flowing through part of our heart that had been dry. Or this change can be like polyps growing a coral reef, a slow and gradual process, until one year the reef is just starting to show above the waves. So, in time, change can be both subtle and massive. Patience can be a truly wonderful energy, keeping up a kindly gentle pressure day after day, year after year.

'Awareness is revolutionary' as Sanghakshita said. Even just knowing about some pattern in ourselves that we would like to be different, we start to make better choices. Those choices start to change our inner and outer conditions, and we change some more.

So there is the more 'linear' or 'developmental' model of becoming aware of and then naturally growing away from unhelpful patterns. And there is the model of becoming aware of different sides of ourselves which might be in conflict with each other, and allowing them to come into harmony - or psycho-spiritual integration.

One part of me may very positively want to give chocolate to my friends, but another part of me feels like having a treat myself. In a way it doesn't matter so much whether the second part of me is being positively self-nurturing, or just greedy and selfish - the point is that these different parts need space to breathe, and even to talk to each other as it were. This is 'integration'. We can reclaim, or accept and hold with kindness, parts of ourselves which we were unaware of - or which we had in some way rejected.

Language and images can be important in all this. The language of transformation, of changing ourselves, of moving away or towards, of development, of path or journey - might or might not work for us. There is also the language of becoming more authentically ourselves: of immanence rather than transcendence, of deeper self-realisation and self-acceptance.

Activism itself can provide crucial situations, where we might find new parts of ourselves, or change and grow. I was once helping out with the theatrical campaigning group BP or not BP? in the British Museum in London, protesting at the Museum's acceptance of BP's sponsorship of an Aboriginal artefacts exhibition. There were many reasons to oppose corporate sponsorship on this occasion. There was BP's business plan (in which climate change is just an acceptable side-effect of making money), its catastrophic and criminal safety record,¹ its collusion in mistreatment of indigenous peoples around the world – and its gaining wholly undeserved social credibility through sponsoring a prestigious public institution.² In addition to all that, the Aboriginal elders hadn't given permission to the Museum for these artefacts to be displayed, so BP was complicit in that too.

So we put on an unauthorised performance in the museum itself, complete with oil rig, an oil worker, a colonial explorer complete with pith helmet, assorted indigenous fauna being killed by an oil spill, a climate scientist in lab coat, and a museum director being smothered in oil and dollars. Apart from coverage in The Guardian newspaper,³ the performance was seen by thousands of people on the day and via social media. As part of the performance, I had volunteered to read out a short statement by one of the aboriginal elders. Or rather, shout at the top of my voice - since the British Museum on a Saturday afternoon is a far from quiet place. This

didn't come naturally to me - in some ways I'm a rather quiet and introverted person. But I did my best, and found my heart breaking open. Having to shout forced me to become directly aware of the place in me that cares deeply. I already knew that I cared. But I didn't know just how much I needed to speak out, to really assert that I didn't agree with what was happening. I had spoken out before in other contexts - but in that very public place, in front of all those people, I found something important.

Ecopsychology

The worldviews dominant in our society to some extent affect our view of ourselves, and our sense of who we could become. Traditional psychology and psychotherapy, starting from the ideas of Freud and Jung, have been particularly influential on our idea of what a human being is. They treat a person mainly as a self-contained unit, with a personal history, which includes the important relationships such as with parents and family. This model can yield valuable insights, but can also play into the denial of our relationship with the natural world and the social atomisation fostered by the neoliberal worldview. A particular aspect of the neoliberal worldview known as extractivism is particularly relevant here - the notion that it's OK to destructively pillage the natural world for resources with no thought for the future, since the natural world has no value of its own. In contrast, ecopsychology suggests that the natural world is important in itself, that our relationship with it might also have a significant impact on our psychological wellbeing - and that this relationship is inevitably tied up with what kind of society we live in.

The negative impact of the modern world on the biosphere surely affects us all in some way - since we are perpetuating a lifestyle which ultimately threatens our own wellbeing and life on Earth. We are, in a sense, collectively self-harming. Some ecopsychologists would suggest that we need a positive relationship with the natural world in order to be psychologically healthy in the fullest sense. We are, in many ways, the same human animal that we were back in the Stone Age. Perhaps we are even in some way 'hard-wired' to spend all our time in the natural world - that is in a way our home, which our psyches look for nourishment from. Difficult to say exactly what that nourishment might be. But there's some evidence that people

physically relax when they interact with green plants,⁴ or when they stroke a cat⁵ – perhaps those are tiny signals, remnants of a much bigger and fuller experience.

Perhaps, at a very deep level, we are uncomfortable with having claimed mastery of the natural world, rather than taking our place as just a part of it. Perhaps we suffer from a lack of humility, even of awe and reverence for the natural world – which should be natural to us. The relative alienation from the natural world which many of us experience might keep us from our deeper selves, from complete being - denying us access to 'soul' or 'spirit'. Perhaps this same alienation also works against us connecting with each other. The writer Bill Plotkin persuasively suggests that these alienations are very bad for us. He proposes a radical overhaul of conventional notions of human development and potential through all the stages of life, with major implications for how we live – especially in the area of education.⁶ Clearly, these ideas might influence our assessment of our own or others' psychological or spiritual wellbeing - but they also raise questions about the modern consumerist, resource-intensive political-economic system and lifestyle.

Re-enchanting the natural world

So, it can be helpful simply to become aware that we may be influenced by an incomplete psychological model of our relationship with the natural and social worlds, which plays into neoliberal and extractivist assumptions. But we probably also need practices to help us avoid living out these assumptions - practices which can help us to re-enchant the natural world. Re-enchanting the natural world could mean many things, but it might start with a sense of respect, and mystery. In terms of hard physics and chemistry, life is only possible in our universe for an extremely tiny length of time compared to the lifespan of the universe. There are huge gaps in our understanding - of the cosmos (for example), of how life began, of how consciousness arises.

So you could say there are rational grounds for a sense of mystery about the natural world. But it's just as valid to approach this in a more emotional, instinctive and intuitive way. Maybe we need myths and practices which celebrate the natural world for its own sake, and for its mystery - which acknowledge our fears and inspirations, and celebrate our sense of the sacred. It might help us to find out about, and reflect upon, beliefs about the natural world which pre-date the Judaeo-Christian worldview

- so-called 'pagan' myths. Or the stories and religions of hunter-gatherer cultures. We could, for example, go on a yatra (as described in chapter seven).

It might also help us if we spend time in the natural world, perhaps completely alone on solitary retreat. This is an opportunity to experience the natural world a little more on its own terms - to letting it soak into our souls, as it were. Under these conditions, we might become more aware of what supports us physically – such as food, water, transportation. And in this situation it can be easier to see (what is harder to be conscious of if we live in a city) that we never leave the natural world. And, despite what the neoliberal story tells, we are not at the centre of it. We're woven into the natural world: our bodies and minds are literally part of it. Under these conditions we can see how the natural world is changing every moment, just as we are, and we can appreciate its beauty more deeply. We can also reflect on how complex and wonderful it all is. This living system that keeps us alive is also mysterious.

We might want to support 're-wilding'. This is a movement to promote ecological diversity and richness, particularly by re-introducing 'keystone' species. Research has shown that re-introducing top predators can considerably influence entire ecosystems, right down to the mix of trees and plants which are dominant in an area. (A famous example was the re-introduction of wolves to the USA's Yellowstone Park in 1995). Even non-predators such as beavers (which are herbivores) can slow rivers down by building dams, which help to greatly increase biodiversity and quantity of fish – and can also help prevent flooding. The idea is not to return to some perfect pre-human purity – but to achieve a much greater ecological natural wealth. We could allow some ecosystems to find their own way, to an extent, whilst making more creative interventions in them – from which we can benefit.⁷

Personal and group shadows

It's good to want to change the world in a positive direction, and to cultivate this idealism - but maybe that makes it even more important that we cultivate awareness of our shadows, both personal and collective. And there will inevitably be shadows. There are many kinds of shadow, including the more obvious ones in our personal psychology such as self-doubt, unconscious guilt, repressed anger and so on. And it's very likely that we will have unconsciously internalised neoliberal values or ideas,

at least to some extent. Examples of that might include equating the worth of a human being with how much money they have, or assuming that one has a right to a greater share of the world's resources than people in other countries.

And there are other shadows and views around in society, overlapping with the neoliberal worldview, which we will have unconsciously internalised to some extent. Such as racism, sexism, fear of or discrimination against transgender people, against gay and lesbian people. This fear and hostility is ultimately against the Other: against anyone or anything that is different to or slightly challenges one's self. Sometimes it's difficult to tell if neoliberal culture is more about economic greed, or the macho male gender identity, or racism. We're just bound to have something of these shadows - perhaps they are to some extent part of the human condition itself. But they are toxic, so it's important to be aware of them as much as possible, and to acknowledge them.

Idealistic people, or idealistic groups, might be in danger of seeing these shadows 'out there', in society generally, but not in themselves. If we care passionately about spiritual ideals such as love, it can be literally difficult to see these shadows in ourselves - and perhaps very painful to acknowledge them.

Hence the importance of cultivating self-awareness and psycho-spiritual integration through various practices - including honest communication with friends one-to-one and in groups - featuring as much transparency and openness as we can manage (or is appropriate). Particularly in group situations, we need to promote a kindly but robust culture - in which questionable behaviour by individuals, or the group, will be challenged. Robust also in recognising that idealistic individuals can do all the bad things that human beings do. We can lie, manipulate, bully, jockey for position within the group, and be downright nasty to each other. And of course, groups with high ideals can nevertheless do things like scapegoating, infighting, hero-worshipping, pressurising people to conform, labelling people, unhealthily affirming the group against 'out there' - and so on.

Ultimately, especially within idealistic groups, much depends on the quality of communication. Practices such as Non-Violent Communication (sometimes described as 'needs-based' communication) can be very helpful, as well as trainings

designed to help groups become aware of their shadows, transform them, and become more creative groups in the process. More on this in appendix 2 'Resources'.

Lastly, it's worth reflecting on the obvious: there's not much point in trying to transform what we see as the negative aspects of society, if we become like those aspects ourselves. Sometimes there is such a thing as having to try to work out which is the lesser evil: but on the whole good ends don't justify unethical means. Not because some religion or ideology tells us so, but because it just doesn't work that way. As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada: "hatred doesn't end by hatred, that is the eternal law". Nowadays many activist groups try to prefigure in themselves the kind of society they would like to see – for example the Occupy movement with its commitment to general assemblies and 'horizontal' inclusive decision making.

The arts, society and the myths we live by

Increasingly, big money is dominating the media, public spaces, and the arts. Politicians, and the corporations themselves, give the impression that we should be grateful for any sponsorship the corporations give, since there just is little money for the arts. They tend to 'talk up' the size and significance of their donations, as if the arts will die without corporate handouts. In fact, corporations often receive a large amount of positive publicity in return for very small donations. As Mel Evans reveals in her book, Artwash,⁸ big institutions (such as the Tate Galleries in London) have a robust range of income sources, and are far less dependent on corporate sponsorship than the public fears. But the fact of corporate sponsorship, and the myths spread about it, lead to an atmosphere in which artists (and arts organisations) self-censor. They tend not to create or promote work that directly questions neoliberal orthodoxy - since big money generally doesn't like that kind of work.

But the arts are important to us: psychologically, spiritually and even politically. They very much inform the stories we tell ourselves about who we are - collectively and individually. The arts can be like a necessary soul-food or inspiration which helps keep us going – in which they are similar to faith. They can inspire us to stay true to

our ideals, and we can even use them to reflect on our spiritual life. They can be like a mythic trellis in our sense of what human experience can be - that we try to grow along, as it were. As Vaclav Havel put it, the arts and free enquiry are like vitamins in society.⁹ Like vitamins, they might not seem obviously important, but without them we die. And to be healthy themselves, the arts need to play freely - and certainly not to be constrained by neoliberal ideology.

Because the arts are so important and influential, it particularly matters what worlds they portray and manifest in themselves. The arts affect our sense of what humanity is capable of, and what society can be. So it matters how history is told, whose history, what values are upheld. How are women treated, or transgender people, or people of colour – for example. How many women get to direct films, for example, and how they are treated in the movie business, and so on. Without getting into extremes of political correctness, ethical values need to be upheld, since often they aren't.

Paradoxically, of course, the corporations are very happy to sell us antineoliberal art, if they can make money at it. To some extent, it is of course possible to nurture the finest aspects of the human imagination and spirituality - within a neoliberal culture. But keeping the human imagination within what is ultimately a neoliberal compound is like trying to maintain biodiversity by keeping animals in zoos. Both will grow sick if they can't run free. It's not enough just to imagine high ideals and ethics: they are energies which need expression in the real world. What kind of society would it be, in which heroism, and the conflict of good with evil, was only really valued in works of fantasy, such as Tolkien's Lord of the Rings? Both our heartfelt ethical imagination, and our sheer, animal, magical artistic play – need free expression in the real world, and to be able to stray into each other's territories.

Given that neoliberalism promotes economic inequality, it is increasingly a question as to who gets into this compound at all. Increasingly, it is only people with substantial wealth behind them who can be educated to a high level within the arts. If wealth keeps concentrating in the hands of the wealthy, in future it will be even more of a question as to who gets to partake of the arts in any way.

To some extent, at least in the wealthy countries, the arts have come to occupy something of the place that a national religion used to occupy. A place of the imagination, of powerful myths, of values and ideals - a place where citizens from differing cultures and backgrounds can be together and meet, at least to some extent. Buildings like the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the British Museum in London and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam are like secular cathedrals - to some extent repositories of a shared sense that there are such things as higher realities and values. Which is why corporations want to gain credibility, a social licence to operate, by being associated with them through financial sponsorship.

It might not seem that important whether an art exhibition is sponsored by BP (for example) - or not. But through identifying with these prestigious public institutions, BP comes to seem like a corporate good citizen. Everything BP does becomes normalised and acceptable - starting with its business plan, in which climate breakdown is an acceptable side-effect of making money. So it's important to contest the corporate infiltration of public spaces and public life - because not to oppose is to accept their neoliberal values and actions into the heart of our society.

Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol is just one example of how the arts can play a key role in the life of a society. When first published in 1843, it was so popular and people found it so inspiring that it was credited with materially assisting the progress of legislation limiting the abusive employment of children. It could be described as an progressivist parable or even myth. Scrooge, a miserly City businessman, is magically confronted with scenes from his life, from early childhood onwards. As he sees how he used to be, how he has turned away from the best things in life, and how he is destined to die - alone and unloved - Scrooge is horrified, and undergoes a profound spiritual conversion. He is reborn as a good man, taking delight in giving, and only concerned to make good his previous unkindnesses as much as possible.

A Christmas Carol is one of the most convincing portrayals of human goodness. Early reviewers remarked how much it made them want to do good things, to practise generosity and compassion. But it also manages to be a convincing tale of human transformation. From miser to born-again philanthropist in one night hardly sounds likely - but Dickens makes us believe it. Just as the Ghosts of Past, Present

and Future almost force Scrooge to use his imagination to develop empathy and humanity - so Dickens, through his literary art, enchants us to do the same, and to want to change.

Harnessing the power of faith

What's meant here is not faith as in trying to believe in something we don't really believe in, or somehow blindly trusting that things will work out OK. I mean faith as in Sangharakshita's wonderful definition: "the emotional response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe".¹⁰ Faith probably needs cultivation, and defending. We live in a neoliberal society, in which even basic humanistic ideals are on the whole not in practice taken seriously by the people with real power. We can easily internalise cynicism, and it can feel strange to affirm spiritual ideals - even to oneself.

But despite all that, we probably do have a very powerful heart-response to spiritual ideals such as loving-kindness and compassion. Faith-practices (described in the next chapter) are simply ways of paying attention to that natural heart-response, and thereby helping it grow. The point is that this kind of faith is a deep and powerful emotional energy, which can be very helpful in sustaining us in our lives generally, and in the face of the political and ecological crisis. It's linked to insight, in seeing clearly what is of most importance – and its deep emotional positivity allows us to be more accepting of impermanence. It's a kind of deep love, that definitely includes caring for oneself, but also goes beyond oneself. It's a very positive and liberating sense that I matter, but I'm not the most important thing - love is the most important thing.

This section of the Karaniya Metta Sutta expresses it much better:

'May all beings be at ease! Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world: spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded. Freed from hatred and ill will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from

drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding'.¹¹

6. MEDITATION AND ACTION FOR THE WORLD

This chapter is a brief survey of Buddhist teachings and practices which might be helpful to people interested in influencing the modern world. So it is Buddhism particularly as relevant for activists – though of course you don't have to describe yourself as a Buddhist to make use of these techniques.

What does Buddhism have to offer?

So what do Buddhist teachings have to offer, especially at this time of political and ecological crisis? Well, Buddhism has a very large stock of excellent practices, perspectives and techniques. But one of its most precious gifts is an endless questioning: a view of the world in which there are no easy answers. Why is that a gift? Because it is truthful - life is complex. Buddhism doesn't claim that everything will be fine if we all identify as Buddhists.

But Buddhism does offer what might be called a transcendental perspective. It does propose that wisdom and compassion are of ultimate value, that there is a path of self-development and deepening wisdom which goes all the way to an extremely high level of spiritual development and insight into reality known as Enlightenment – which is in principle attainable by all human beings. It suggests that you will move along that path if you practise - but it also says 'test out these teachings in the fire of your own experience'. Are the teachings true? Do they work? Are they helping you?

So, Buddhist teachings are there to help, but essentially our fate is in our own hands, and we have to work things out for ourselves. Having said that, my own experience is that, like many things, if I put the work in, results do come. And that even the most seemingly-intractable patterns start to change - which can be a wonderful and magical thing.

What benefits can one realistically expect from Buddhist practice? It might help one to be less blown about by 'the worldly winds'. These are the winds of praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and infamy – which blow particularly strong in more neoliberal societies. This is not a position of false superiority 'above' the world, but, being less swayed by our own greed, hatred and delusion, our heart is actually freer to be concerned about suffering. In fact, to be more often in a state of insight, faith (or heart-response to one's ideals) and loving-kindness actually makes life easier: it gives access to deeper energies. Being more rooted in spiritual values tends to positively simplify things, since we tend to base our life more on what's really important.

Also, increased self-awareness makes it less likely that we will fall into replicating the drawbacks of what we are opposed to - such as use of power or any kind of violence, or greed for status - and more likely that we will make the space we need to look after ourselves and each other. Spiritual practice tends to give rise to calm, confidence, patience, and more consistent inspiration.

Sounds good? Here are brief descriptions of some key Buddhist practices, particularly bringing out how they might be relevant to someone wanting to directly influence the modern world. Should you wish to try them out practically, brief 'taster' descriptions of the relevant meditations and reflections are in appendix 1.

Most of us have busy lives, in which it can be hard to initiate and maintain a meditation practice. If you would like to know more about that, or meditation or Buddhism - I'd highly recommend learning from good teachers in person. See Resources section for some starting-points.

Mindfulness practice (appendix 1)

Mindfulness could also be described as self-awareness – and there are many ways of developing it. Increased mindfulness can be a slightly double-edged sword, since we become more aware of things we might in a way prefer to be unaware of - such as painful tensions and difficult emotions. But as we gently persist with the practice, awareness itself tends to dissolve those difficult feelings. Being more aware of what

we're really feeling, and therefore of who we really are, we tend to make better choices in our lives.

Perhaps many of us tend towards being a bit more busy than is really good for us - becoming more aware of how we are feeling can help us give ourselves time for self-nurturing. Sangharakshita said this practice can be like a sheet anchor in one's life. A sheet anchor is a large cloth open cone with a hole at the pointed end. The water slows the ship down, but still passes through the sheet. The practice can help us develop stability without rigidity - being aware of but not so tossed around by the currents in our life.

If we are tending to over-think or ruminate – thoughts obsessively chasing themselves, but not helping our state of mind – paying attention to the breath in particular can really help us to cut through the wandering thoughts, and let them go. When we manage to relax - whilst maintaining gentle focus on the breath – this practice can be intensely pleasurable and satisfying. Yet it costs nothing, and is available to us every moment for the rest of our lives.

Pure awareness practice (appendix 1)

Sometimes called 'just sitting'. Particularly good for psycho-spiritual integration, for becoming intimately aware of all our various drives and patterns. It involves opening a space in our experience in which anything might show up - it's good to have a basic attitude of receptivity, even welcoming whatever arises.

This practice and basic attitude might be especially helpful during periods of internal or external turbulence. Or you might be going through a time of personal change, in which you are no longer sure exactly who you are. This practice can help you have a sense of groundedness and self-connection, even if you feel you are steering through the rapids, as it were. If you're feeling very emotional, for example angry or despairing, it might be helpful to just sit for a relatively long time - watching the emotions and views come and go, and slowly calming down. Not observing coldly - but with a background kindness, as far as possible.

Loving-kindness practice (appendix 1)

Many people don't find this practice as easy as the first two - at least to begin with. The whole idea of cultivating love and kindness can seem strange. It might feel like you're going through the motions, a bit artificial, and that it's just not working. Maybe even by the end of the practice you're not feeling much, or even any, loving-kindness. But in the context of regular meditation and reflection, even the tiniest and most subtle positive emotions will grow. If you look carefully, you'll probably find that your mind and heart do have very subtle responses to emotive words, such as 'kindness'. If given attention, these subtle echoes will grow - meditation practice is just giving supportive conditions for that to happen.

Even if it might feel a little conceptual and superficial, it might be worth persevering with this practice, since the benefits are considerable and far-reaching. According to the tradition, one benefit is good looks! Whilst it won't modify your body, it's surely true that people who are good at loving themselves and others tend to be truly self-confident, and to attract other people like bees to a flower.

In a way this practice is a laboratory for how you relate to everyone. In the relative tranquillity of meditation, you see and feel directly something of how you tend to relate to yourself, your good friend, and someone you're not getting on with (traditionally called 'the enemy'). We probably tend to see people we dislike in two dimensions - partly our feelings mean we're just not interested in understanding them better. But in this meditation we begin to see them much more in three dimensions - to see that they too have feelings, needs and perspectives.

So this meditation is a laboratory in the sense of analysis, but also in the sense of experimentation. You're perhaps imagining or seeing more different sides to 'the enemy' than you usually do, you might be imagining how the world looks to them, and you're trying out a different way of relating to them. Already, your relationship with 'the enemy' is different.

I've described this practice as relating to self, good friend and 'enemy'. But traditionally, this practice also includes a stage for a 'neutral person'. For this stage, you would choose someone you are acquainted with, but only superficially. It might be someone you have a functional relationship with, for example someone serving in

a shop you go to. And you wish them well, in just the same way as the other stages. One difficulty with this stage is that you probably don't have strong feelings of any kind about this person - it can be easy to lose interest. But this stage is actually quite important - it is, in a way, about your relationship with the world. Given that the global human population right now is about 7.5 billion, that's something like 7.5 billion people you will never have time to meet. It's great to know things about them, to be concerned about global justice and so on – but what are the realities of your feelings about these people? What are the textures of your relationship with them?

Loving-kindness practice is about opening your heart, and about maximising its health and strength. It brightens the emotional 'weather' going on in you. It also changes how you see the world - it does have a very important insight aspect. You might be wondering about that stage of generating equal loving-kindness to each person, including 'the enemy'. Isn't it a bit false and unnatural to do that - why even try? The short answer is that it's good for us. Sure, there can be a positive side to anger (for example) - if held with awareness and focussed in the right way. But most of the time, being angry is a waste. It hurts us, drains our energy, and prevents us from seeing clearly.

The longer answer is that seeing from loving-kindness takes us closer to reality, and that's a good thing. When we drop our reactions and look afresh at 'the enemy', perhaps imagining something of how they came to be the way they appear to be, we begin to see their conditionality – and perhaps our own too. It becomes harder to maintain the views our dislike of them depends upon. In the last stage of the meditation, seeing each person with loving-kindness, we see our common mortality, and our common humanity - and perhaps glimpse how complex that is. So this kind of insight from loving-kindness can liberate us, at a deep level, from our own greed, hatred and delusion.

Lastly, this practice can help us with deep self-confidence. Many people are confident in lots of ways: but not so many people have the self-confidence that comes from knowing and loving themselves at a deeper level. When learning this meditation practice, people often find it easier to feel love for their friend than for themselves. In this situation, we might ask ourselves: 'are my friends, who love me,

foolish?' The answer is that we are probably not foolish to love our friends, nor they to love us. Are we really so especially unworthy and unlovable? Are we really so different from our friends? Perhaps in fact we are just like our friends: ordinary human beings who deserve love - and it's OK to love ourselves as we love them.

Insight

Buddhist insight means being less subject to greed, hatred and delusion - and therefore seeing more clearly. So it definitely has a cognitive aspect, but it also has a very important emotional component, since it arises through positive rather than negative emotions. If insight isn't grounded in loving-kindness, it isn't insight.

There is a real danger of one-sided, over-intellectual effort resulting in emotional alienation. So it's important that insight practice starts from emotional warmth and loving-kindness, and proceeds with self-awareness. If you are suffering from any kind of mental health difficulty, or are feeling emotionally vulnerable at the moment, I would advise you not to do insight practice. Perhaps read the descriptions, but bear the actual practice in mind for later.

Insight reflection (appendix 1)

Insight reflection can be very helpful for dealing with, or avoiding, feelings of 'overwhelm'. By 'overwhelm' I'm not meaning a state where we are in fact overwhelmed - we really are doing too much, things really are too much for us. I mean the state of over-worrying about anything, to the point where it's exhausting.

It's hard to engage with the political and ecological state of the world, and not feel (at least sometimes) some degree of horrified anxiety. To not have an unconscious yearning for it all to get better: for everything to be, finally, Fixed. One effect of reflecting on impermanence can be that we realise that in the long term, in the very big picture, there is no final victory or defeat - impermanence just keeps going. An emotionally-positive acceptance of impermanence can help us relax, and release a lot of energy, at a deep level. Rather than tightly holding on to a vision of how we want things to be (and tiring ourselves with fear, grief and so on) we accept that things will always be changing. But insight also helps us to be very alive to and clear about what is of ultimate value: qualities such as love, compassion and wisdom,

and that these values are really worth fighting for. That our individual contribution might seem small in the big scheme of things - but it is significant and valuable.

Out of concern for the world, and particularly if we are trying to promote political or social change, we might get angry - or start to feel oppositional to people or perspectives that we disagree with. Even in the busiest or most stressful situations, this practice can really help us let go of proliferating thinking – the kind that just isn't helping us. This reflection tends to put us in touch with, and helps us to accept, the reality of impermanence. It can help us let go of angry thoughts, internal monologues and fantasies which are wasting our energy. It can help us simply pay attention to our experience, to what is actually happening, to what actually needs doing.

Lastly, the insight perspective can help us see and feel how complex things are - and this can help take us away from what might be painful personal over-investment. Not towards a cold pseudo-equanimity, looking down on the world's suffering. But when we look at conditionality, how things come about through webs of myriad conditions, we quite simply tend to stop taking things too personally. Of course it matters what we do, and we do have a contribution to make. But we might need to counter the unconscious view that climate change is somehow our personal fault, and up to us alone to solve it - for example.

Solitary practice (appendix 1)

Solitude can be a great spiritual practice, and it cuts through many of the illusions that neoliberal consumerist culture depends on. Owning lots of things or having status won't bolster our sense of self, or protect us from our own mind, when we are in solitude or solitary retreat. In those conditions, it's very difficult to maintain the busyness, the restlessness, lack of self-awareness and sheer stimulation that modern life gives. Solitude pushes us towards depending on and developing our inner resources, such as our heart-responses to ideals, deep self-confidence, contentment and so on.

All these things could also be said of meditation practice, since solitary practice in a way is just an extension of meditation. When we meditate, we are alone with our

own mind: we tend to become much more directly aware of what is going on inside us. And the same is true of solitude as a spiritual practice.

There is in fact a continuum - going all the way from any kind of mindfulness practice in the midst of a busy lifestyle, to spending days, weeks, or even months in solitary retreat. And - just like meditation - solitude is in no sense an escape. Quite the reverse - in solitude we tend to become acutely aware of our patterns. In fact, it tends to be a rather strong confrontation with oneself. Although other people aren't around, we still carry the patterns of our relationships with them around in our minds. As Sangharakshita once said: 'if we can't be with other people, we can't be with ourselves; if we can't be with ourselves, we can't be with other people'. Our issues remain the same as they ever were - solitude is just another way of working with them.

Solitary practice can be hard work, but extremely rewarding. Letting go of any rumination and negative proliferation of thinking that might arise, we can enter into deep contentment and relaxation. Probably a relative lack for many people, which might be at least partly behind irrational fears and obsessive thinking - is deep self-confidence, or a confidence that one can be loved, or a positive self-love. In my own experience of solitaires, I've been almost forced to develop a friendlier relationship with myself. When looking back at my life, I've become much kinder in how I regard my younger self, as it were. I've also come to be clearer about the values I have based my life upon - which has helped with self-confidence. Over the years, I'd say my solitary practice has helped me to deeper positive self-love. I'm more content, have a fuller heart, and am more able to love other people.

Like insight, solitude is generally a more intense kind of practice. If you are suffering from any kind of mental health condition, or are feeling low or vulnerable - I would advise you to leave solitary practice until later.

Faith

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is faith in the sense of our heart-response to our ideals of love, kindness, compassion and so on. One of its great features is that it overturns the the false values and worldviews of neoliberalism so influential in

modernity. (In one Buddhist teaching, these false values are described as: seeing the impermanent as permanent, the unreal as real, the painful as pleasant, the spiritually ugly as beautiful). When we make a heart-connection with our core values, there can be a feeling of deep relief and relaxation: a sense of re-connecting with who we really are, where we are really coming from.

This kind of faith can be an enormously inspiring and sustaining energy - and that energy is to do with where it's coming from, and what it is oriented towards. It's not just psychological positivity - 'I'm feeling good'. Our faith-response comes from a deep place in us, and it has a transpersonal and perhaps even transcendental quality. It's not just about us as individuals - perhaps it's like we very much want something to exist and be upheld in the universe, particularly for the sake of all life. Maybe it's related to the beauty and visions of human potential that we might experience through the arts and imagination. Faith arises with the positivity we gain through ethical practice, and has elements of insight – since it takes us towards reality and what is most important. As a mental state, faith tends to be accompanied by confidence, calm and loving-kindness. Like any mental state, it can be cultivated in a number of ways.

Cultivating faith through stories

Sometimes, a story can as it were punch through ideas, theories and worldviews. They stir us first in our emotions, and call for reflection on what is moving us so much.

The famous story of Rosa Parks, for example. In 1950s, segregated, southern USA, she refused to comply when told to give up her seat to a white person. A black woman, on her own, on a bus, defying a racist law - calling it out for what it was. So courageous, and so moving. Impossible to know how many millions of people that one story must have inspired. I don't know Rosa Parks's experience. I don't know her history before that moment on the bus, how she felt, or exactly what her action meant to her. But I still find it very inspiring that someone called Rosa Parks (with many others) stood up to racism and injustice, and that she was part of the Civil Rights Movement that eventually had the effects it had. This story is one of many that puts me in touch with how I value justice, fair treatment of people, my concern

for people. It also puts me in touch with a vision of how I'd like to be, or how I can be at my best, and how I'd like society to be.

The story of how the Buddha started on his spiritual quest also inspires me, in different though related ways. The Buddha was born a prince, called Gautama, in around 500BC northern India. The story goes that his father, the King, believed a prophecy that his son would leave the palace and become a wandering mendicant. So the King made sure that Gautama, as he grew up, was protected from the unpleasant realities of life, that might set Gautama thinking. Gautama was surrounded with every luxury and temptation that wealth could provide - to make sure that the prophecy didn't come true.

But one day Gautama was out riding with his charioteer, Channa, when he saw an old man, hobbling along supported by a stick. Gautama hadn't seen an old person before, since his father had kept such unwelcome sights away from him. He asked Channa what was wrong with the old man, and Channa replied that there was nothing particularly the matter, it was just that the man was old - that old age is something which comes to everyone who lives long enough. This was news to Gautama. Soon after, they happened to come across a sick person. Again, Gautama hadn't seen illness before, and was disturbed to learn from Channa that this too was something that could happen to anyone. They rode on, and later came across what was a common sight in India then - a human corpse, lying by the side of the road, wrapped in a sheet. Gautama was very disturbed to learn about death - another unwelcome reality which his father had kept from him. Towards the end of their ride, they came across a holy man with his begging bowl, striding along. Channa explained that this man had renounced worldly pleasures, and had gone forth in search of spiritual liberation.

To cut a long story short, Gautama ended up emulating the holy man. Simply enjoying himself wasn't enough. The thought that life was nothing more than old age, sickness and death bothered him - he wanted to find some way out, for his own sake, and for humanity's. So, Gautama renounced everything. He gave up being a prince, left the palace, and became a wandering mendicant. Wearing a robe made from bits of other robes, carrying a begging bowl, sleeping rough - in search of spiritual liberation.

I love this story, partly because it upholds the opposite of neoliberal values. Gautama wasn't just born into a wealthy society - he was also right at the top of his world. But he renounced all his wealth, and all his status in society's eyes - in favour of pursuing spiritual values. He saw that pursuit of wealth alone was rather empty in the face of the existential situation. I also love this story because of its sense of uncertainty. Gautama didn't know the answers, he just knew there was a big question in need of some kind of an answer - and he set off into the unknown to see what he could find. He renounced security and power in favour of a more authentic vulnerability and mystery.

Cultivating faith through study

So, we can cultivate faith through inspiring stories, and considering what they mean to us – what is our heart-response to them. In a similar way, we can study teachings that we find inspiring: study in this sense being considering what they mean intellectually, but also very much being alive to their effect on us emotionally. We might just feel the wisdom of teachings such as the first verses of the Dhammapada (see chapter three) - and that alone can inspire faith. Or we might be struck by the sublime vision of love and compassion in the Karaniya Metta Sutta,¹ for example:

'Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world: spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded.'

Or, we might cultivate our awareness of the good effect of practice. If, say, we feel that meditation is really helping us, it might be worth taking time to be really conscious of that beneficial effect - which means we become more confident about the teachings the practice derives from. This can be a virtuous loop - we become more aware of the beneficial effect, that means we are more inclined to (or receptive to) practice, so perhaps we are inspired to practice a bit more frequently or diligently, so it has more effect on us.

Cultivating faith through images and ritual

More traditional forms of Buddhism use communal recitation of verses, alongside devotional images, shrines, incense, mantra recitation and so on - to cultivate faith. They don't necessarily work for everyone - particularly if you weren't brought up in such traditions. And for anyone brought up in a theistic tradition, who has rejected theism, these practices can look like 'religion' in the negative connotation of blind or irrational belief.

But these kind of practices can be remarkably effective and transformative. They aren't about praying to some deity to do things for us. But they may use figures that look like deities – in Tibetan Buddhism there is Tara, for example. The practice is to evoke these inspiring figures and reflect on their qualities – Tara's spontaneous compassion for example – in order to cultivate those qualities in ourselves.

These faith practices work on our instincts and emotions through poetry, imagery and sound, to inspire us with spiritual qualities such as love, compassion and wisdom. Perhaps they can be a little scary, since they might be taking us away from what we are familiar with culturally - and perhaps psychologically and spiritually too. And it's probably a good idea to follow one's instincts with regard to how much or how fast to go into them. But it is sometimes said that these practices can promote transformation more effectively than meditation, so perhaps it is worth giving them a try.

One story might illustrate the kind of energy being cultivated here. In 13th century Japan there was a very prevalent cultural despondency. People believed that the human race was declining, that everything was going downhill, and that The End was not far off. Against this background, a Pure Land Buddhist monk called Ippen was wandering around, preaching the benefits of chanting the nembutsu. This was the Japanese mantra dedicated to Amitabha. Amitabha is a deity-like Enlightened figure, seated cross-legged in meditation, and whose skin is red. The red colour is because he is permeated by hri - an exquisite sensitivity to ethics, a passionate and completely selfless love for all beings.

Sometimes Ippen and his followers would, in their enthusiasm for the practice, chant the nembutsu one million times. I don't know exactly how they arranged this, it seems they did it over seven days. But they weren't just chanting. They were

focussing their minds and hearts on Amitabha and his qualities of deep ethical awareness, and true love for all beings. They were becoming permeated by his ruby-red light of contentment and compassion. Apparently, during one such recitation, a follower just spontaneously got up and started dancing, ecstatically. Soon, others followed - and so a new Buddhist tradition was born.²

Buddhas for activists

It can be helpful to find out about and reflect on the various qualities of the Buddhas - particularly if one is facing a situation and in need of certain spiritual resources.

Manjughosha might be good for courage, for example. He is in meditation posture seated on a lion throne, symbolising fierce energy which is also well-grounded. And he is brandishing a sword as if about to strike. But his skin is deep red, meaning that he is suffused with loving-kindness. He holds the sword very sensitively, seemingly with just his fingers – since it is the sword of kindly wisdom. This wisdom is an incredibly skilful cutting-through of the views that cause suffering. With his left hand he is holding a book to his heart, symbolising the compassionate wisdom behind his energy. His name means ‘sweet-voiced’.

Or other Buddha-figures might be helpful. Vajrapani’s name means ‘holding the thunderbolt’. There may be negative powerful energies around, but he can hold them, transform them into skilful action. Tara, for sheer spontaneous love and compassion, but from a centred and wise place. Akshobya – for stability. He is seated in meditation posture, but he is touching the ground delicately with the tips of the fingers of his right hand. So he is well-connected with the earth, confident in his values, unshakeable. Avalokitesvara, with his hands in prayer-position in front of his chest – for compassion, and heartfelt devotion to all living beings. Or the historical Buddha himself – Gautama. A real, live human being who embodied all these qualities.

We can reflect on the Buddhas’ qualities, whilst reciting the particular mantra associated with each one – just chanting continuously for as long as we feel like. Avalokitesvara’s mantra is ‘Om mani padme hum’, for example. The words can be

translated as 'praise to the jewel in the lotus' – but what's most important is the spiritual quality associated with the mantra (which in this case is compassion). Mantra recitation traditionally is said to protect the mind. Certainly it can be a way of keeping negative thoughts at bay: a way of reflecting on positive qualities, being permeated by them and giving them space to grow.

7. EMBODYING VALUES IN OUR COLLECTIVE LIFE

I remember feeling a slight apprehension when I first knocked on the green door of the West London Buddhist Centre in early 1993. 'What's behind the green door?'¹ I asked myself, as it opened to a cool dim interior - musty with nag champa incense. At the time I was sceptical about anything religious, but interested in meditation, somewhat stressed, and dimly aware that I needed healing.

So I was like very many people when they first encounter Buddhism. What happened over the next year or two was magical, and one of the most exciting times of my life. That I had been unconsciously looking for spiritual practice was a huge surprise to me. Soon I was living in the Buddhist Centre itself (the building was a Buddhist Centre and men's community combined). It seemed to me a place filled with exotic Buddhist images - and some equally exotic Buddhist people. Every weekday, dressed in my grey suit, I would take the bus to the grey Home Office headquarters in Westminster. For a long time my life seemed surreal to me. I was living in a state of culture shock, as well as psychological and spiritual ferment.

But overall it was as if I had, without really knowing it, been living in a sort of pit - and now someone had kindly let down a rope ladder, so I had the means to get myself out. It was hard work, but I began to grow, and change, and become happier. Sometimes it was as if blood was starting to flow through parts of my heart that hadn't been quite alive, which I hadn't even known existed.

Of course, the Buddhist Centre - and all the courses, classes, books and retreats it gave me access to and which helped me so much - didn't happen by accident. It and they were the result of the hard work and generosity of very many people - most of whom I would never meet.

Love does make the world go round

It's good to bring to mind how much our society isn't neoliberal. Ideals of love, trust, decency and honesty underpin how much of the world actually works - not greed or competition. These ideals, and the vast amounts of hard work they inspire, are completely real and necessary aspects of our society and economy – and they are severely under-acknowledged.

How far would society get without parents, working extremely hard, and effectively for no pay (or with meagre assistance from society), on the task of bringing up children? Or family members acting as unpaid (or underpaid) carers for parents? I've worked for the last few years as a carer on a dementia assessment ward – and have been frequently humbled by the outstanding skill and compassion showed by low-paid staff in caring for patients with extremely challenging behaviours. I'm likewise impressed by the skill and compassion of the nurses, and by the fact they routinely work substantial unpaid overtime - because routine, systemic staffing shortages mean there isn't time to do work that needs to be done. Many doctors, nurses, teachers and lawyers work large amounts of unpaid overtime - out of a love of what they do.² And then there is the entire voluntary and charitable sector.

Even the world of business substantially depends on trust. Of course, there are safeguards, checks and deterrents - but much proceeds on appropriate trust, or risk assessment (to put it another way). This is in fact part of the glue that holds society together.

Apart from mainstream society, there are very many 'alternative' initiatives dedicated to positive ideals. There are co-operative businesses, intentional communities and social enterprises. They might be alleviating suffering in some way, or attempting to work or live in a more idealistic way than mainstream society tends to.

Just to illustrate with some examples. A Christian co-operative sells vegan organic wholefoods with minimum packaging, operates on consensus decision-making as far as possible, has high standards of business ethics, employs and supports some staff with mental health issues. A Dutch bank only invests in ethical businesses, and

makes a point of lending money to small-scale 'green' social enterprises and businesses. Five Buddhist men live in a small house together (relatively low-carbon use of resources). They make decisions consensually, have a communal food budget, each cooks one night per week for the others, they meditate together each morning, and meet as a community one night per week.

It's good to celebrate what is already happening, and what we ourselves might already be doing. We need inspiration, to have confidence and belief in our own values - and to be conscious that those values are in different ways shared by many people beyond the Buddhist community. Society doesn't have to be run along neoliberal principles, and to a significant degree isn't. As David Graeber (one of the main thinkers behind the Occupy movement) points out: our personal and work lives proceed a great deal through co-operation, trust and empathic negotiation. Our personal lives share many features with direct democracy, consensus decision-making, and even anarchy.³

Traditional Buddhism in the modern world

In a similar way, there is a great deal to celebrate in the Buddhist world. More traditional forms of Buddhism are a profound challenge to the neoliberal worldview. For example the forest monks of Thailand - living very lightly on the Earth much as the Buddha and his disciples did. Accepting food offerings from householders, sleeping rough in the jungle, meditating at the foot of trees. Practising mindful calm and insight, even when they come face to face with tigers - using the conditions to go deeper in their spiritual practice.

At the same time, traditional Buddhism is also modern Buddhism. Some Buddhists, who are extremely traditional in their lifestyle and practice, are right at the forefront of Engaged Buddhist resistance to social injustice. There are the Thai Ecology Monks, for example, who have ordained trees, as a way of trying to protect the environment and livelihood of local people.⁴

Modern Buddhism influencing society

Both more traditional and modern Buddhism have a transformative effect on society through spreading Buddhist teachings. That manifests through teaching people who are interested in learning meditation or about Buddhism - through classes, courses,

talks, retreats and so on. But offering Buddhist teachings can also have the aspect of affecting the ideas current in society. Buddhists write books and articles, or give interviews and so on - which appear in mainstream media. A considerable amount of Buddhist material is available for free or by donation on the internet. In the UK, teaching materials on Buddhism for primary and secondary school children have won prizes for their excellent quality, and are much used and appreciated.⁵

Buddhist practices have become influential in the modern world in many different ways. There is the secular mindfulness movement, teaching people how to relax through increased self-awareness. Buddhism and mindfulness have been creatively brought into treating stress, depression, addiction and chronic physical pain. People have spent many years bringing Buddhist practice into different aspects of their lives. So there are people who know from experience what it is like to be a parent, or starting a business - and practising Buddhism at the same time. Some of those people have written books about their practice, or have become teachers, or serve as examples. There are also the many ways people are living more obviously Buddhist lifestyles - working part or full time in urban Buddhist centres, retreat centres, businesses, or living in Buddhist residential communities.

There is much to be celebrated in the Buddhist world, and we can have confidence in its intrinsic value. The Buddhist world is definitely not perfect, being made of imperfect Buddhists. But there are institutions (and practitioners) dedicated to wisdom and compassion, offering teachings which relieve suffering - transforming people and therefore society. We have spiritual communities linked by many friendships – holding the ideals of consensus decision making and spiritual hierarchy in creative tension. To some extent the Buddhist world already models social relationships that enable people to thrive and honour connection - to self, to others, and to the natural world.

Spiritual friendship as resistance

The Buddha once said that spiritual friendship is not half the spiritual life, but the whole of the spiritual life.⁶ Friendships in which two people consciously hold spiritual

values in common and are serious about their practice will be inspiring and nourishing for both parties - and will naturally be developmental and transformative.

It's difficult to measure how much effect spiritual friendships have in the world. They don't have obvious manifestations in terms of buildings, money or prestigious prizes for example, or output measures and performance indicators. But one sign of their importance and effectiveness is when something goes wrong. Good friends will really go out of their way for each other - in terms of time, attention, effort, and even financial support.

But in some ways it's even more impressive how, in a community of people sharing spiritual values, there might be surprisingly powerful connections between people who are little more than acquainted. They might have known each other for some time at a distance, as it were, and have only have spent a small amount of time actually in each other's company - but enough to see where the other is coming from. Maybe Person A falls ill, or suddenly needs somewhere to live - and Person B is right there for them. Not out of some kind of self-imposed duty, or in order to impress other people - but because they want to. They feel such a connection with and even love of Person A - because of truly shared spiritual values.

Needless to say, all that is profoundly at odds with neoliberal values. In more repressive and authoritarian regimes, any outward dissent or resistance (to obvious social injustice, for example) meets with harsh punishment. We might at the moment be lucky enough to be living in a society where we are allowed to practise Buddhism as we wish, and to express our opinions. But there is reason to be concerned that that might not always be the case. So in future, it's possible networks of friendships might be part of the spiritual resistance, as it were. Passing unauthorised texts from hand to hand, for example - doing whatever can be done to keep better values alive.

Could Buddhism engage more directly with the political and ecological situation?

Could we go further in bringing the political and ecological world into our collective practice? What we are doing already is excellent and valuable - but we could do it a

little differently. Urban Buddhist centres, or retreat centres, could become 'greener' in various ways, such as energy use. They could, for example, decide to provide only vegan and fairtrade food (whilst allowing flexibility on what people bring with them).

Urban Buddhist centres could encourage social engagement at local level. Wisely compassionate or pro-environment activities tend to work in the same direction: transforming society, promoting social cohesion and resilience to climate change. Any of these could be undertaken by a group of friends, supporting each other, as spiritual practice. There are many possibilities, such as organising a food bank, getting involved with community-supported agriculture, starting an internet community 'noticeboard', collecting spare clothing for refugees, a vegan food festival, befriending lonely older people, clothes swapping events ('swishing'), joining in a local interfaith festival, campaigning for your local council to take its investment away from fossil fuel companies (many more ideas in the Buddhist Action Month handbook in Appendix 2: Resources). A group of spiritual friends might stage their own demonstration on, say, an international trade deal, locally - or travel together to join in a national-level march or action.

There are many ways in which Buddhist teachings can be a support and inspiration to the environmental and progressive movements. At a very basic level, learning meditation techniques can help activists look after themselves and prevent burnout. Buddhist wisdom teachings and faith practices, as well as training in ethics and skilful communication, can help activists to engage with transforming society from a place of spiritual depth and inspiration. This could take the form of actual trainings and retreats (as at the Ecodharma retreat centre in Catalunya, Spain) – or more organically, through Buddhists getting involved in activism.

Of course, there needn't be a firm division between how we live our lives, and activism. Grassroots activism can transform local communities towards greater environmental resilience, and be part of a global movement with political implications. In Todmorden, UK, Incredible Edibles⁷ started with two middle-aged housewives who began 'guerrilla gardening'. This is unauthorised planting of fruit and vegetables in land which isn't being used to its full potential. Their enthusiasm and energy eventually spawned many local projects, including startups and training programmes – which hadn't been intended at the outset. They helped to stimulate a

dense network – one idea leading to another, promoting a culture of participation, and significantly stronger community.

Hopefully, almost all Buddhists will be in favour of humanity doing something positive about climate change - of mitigating its worst effects on humans, and on the natural world we all depend upon. If we practise with an organised form of Buddhism, that organisation could, after appropriate consultation and consideration, make a general statement to this effect. It's easy to think that statements don't matter - but they do. It's important that the neoliberal silence – of only one world being possible - is broken as often as possible.⁸

Buddhist practice and the natural world

We could make more time for discussion about Buddhism and politics and the natural world - but as a spiritual practice, as an exploration of what we think Buddhism is, and what it means to us in our lives. How do we feel about these big ecological and political issues? How are we responding to them in our life? Could we be doing more of something, less of something, or might we do something differently? Joanna Macy's Buddhist-influenced Work that Reconnects exercises could help with this process - providing a safe and emotionally-positive space for deeper awareness and reflection on these issues.⁹

If ecopsychology is right, and people leading the modern lifestyle might actually be suffering from a dysfunctional and alienated relationship with the natural world, then Buddhist practice needs to include ways of addressing that directly - as a response to suffering. One practical way of bringing the natural world more into our sense of Buddhist practice, is to go on a yatra. This is a sort of walking retreat - which could be just an hour or so in the local park, or up to 2 weeks or more. Usually, people walk in silence in single file, possibly a bit more slowly than usual, through beautiful countryside. There will be breaks for food, and maybe setting up camp, and there might be chance to share reflections on the day in the evening. There might be opportunities to reflect on some pagan or prehistoric associations of the landscape. But usually it will be mostly in silence. People often find that mindful walking, in a supportive group of people, promotes a surprisingly clear and positive state of mind

- which is very sensitive and open to the natural world. A state of mind which might help us heal from the relationship with the natural world which we were born into - in which we might consider new ways of relating as well as new ways of being.

It's sometimes suggested that in early Buddhism there might have been an element of looking down on, of negatively trying to escape from, the natural world - which can be inaccurately equated with 'samsara' (the world of mundane desires and suffering). But rather than rejecting the natural world, the earliest Buddhist writings seem to embrace it. It's where most things happen, and saturates the language of the teachings. This is just speculation, but it seems not impossible that the Buddha's early followers in reality had a very positive relationship with the natural world (compared to ours), which they may not have been fully conscious of. Many of the Buddha's disciples were monks, so it might have been useful to them to think of themselves as trying to escape from the mundane world, including its fleshly desires. We could simply enjoy the natural world as it appears in the earliest scriptures. We could allow ourselves to imagine that the early Buddhists in practice had an appreciative and non-destructive relationship with the natural world.

We ourselves come from the natural world, our bodies go back to it when we die - but in reality we are always part of it. It's not just our only home, it is also, in a way, our mother and father - it created and sustains us. But with our consumerist conditioning, we have an uneasy half-sense of the natural world as the apparently infinite and unvalued source of the things we buy, or as a sort of blank into which the things we throw away disappear. So perhaps forging a new relationship with the natural world ultimately comes down to self-respect - since how can we fully honour ourselves if we don't honour our home and our parents?

I'm aware that the language of honouring 'home' and 'parents' won't work for everyone. But it does draw attention to an issue which is common to everyone - which is origin. Where do we come from? What created us? What sustains us? We could cultivate a sense of respect for the natural world as something that is at least important - or even sacred or divine. Because although terms like 'home', 'mother', 'father' and 'origin' might begin to suggest the sort of psychological and spiritual significance the natural world has for us - it's really more important and mysterious

than that. The more we look at things, the more we see how utterly amazing, mysterious and precious life itself is.

How might we encourage our sense of the natural world as sacred or divine? One way might be to spend time in it, and observe closely. See how it's changing, all the time. The clouds, the weather, the sun and moon - grasses growing up and fading back. And perhaps reflecting on oneself having a place in this spinning ecosystem - racing at 110,000km per hour round the sun - in this galaxy, moving at 2.1million km per hour away from the Big Bang. And that many cosmologists think that there was something before the Big Bang - perhaps infinite universes.

Or we might bring our sense of the natural world into some Buddhist devotional ritual. There is the jewel-mandala ritual from Tibetan Buddhism, for example, in which we imagine gathering together all the riches of the natural world as devotional offerings to the Buddha. Or we might adapt a traditional Buddhist ritual, to include figures from even older religions that might speak to us - figures such as the Green Man from Celtic mythology.

Or we might cultivate insight through considering our relationship with the natural world. In the 6 element meditation practice, for example, we consider our bodies as comprising 6 elements which we have, as it were, borrowed from the universe. We didn't make, we don't control these elements - they made us. They have come together temporarily to make us, and they will return to the universe when we die. We do this practice from a place of loving-kindness and positivity, so we don't become depressed or morbid. We just see our own impermanence very clearly - how amazing and precious life is. We see that we are literally part of the natural world, we are made of it, there is no boundary between ourselves and it.

Facing the big picture: cultivating faith

Having said all this, it is possible when looking at the big picture to feel a bit hopeless. It can all feel very tiny - well-meaning but ineffectual given the scale of the political and ecological challenges facing the world. It is true that some of the factors which could quickly deliver serious large-scale change, which can actually reduce a country's carbon footprint by a few percent, tend themselves to be large-

scale. Things like a sudden increase in the cost of something - or a change of policy by a government, or corporation.

But there are a number of good reasons for focusing on what we can do - even if that's 'just' local or small-scale. The first is that this is definitely one of the ways big change comes about. Ultimately, governments and corporations will be influenced - if there is a significant shift towards vegan food, for example, or if green banking is popular enough. Or if there is enough support (especially internationally) for regulating the corporations.

Also, we do urgently need to build resilience in the face of climate change - locally, nationally and globally. We will need to adapt, and make big changes to how we live - and every bit of increased social cohesion and receptivity to low-carbon living will pay dividends.

And in the end, we need to respond to these political and ecological challenges, because responding to suffering is at the heart of Buddhist practice. Good to think about strategy and tactics - but emotionally we need to dig deep into our sense of what is most important, and cultivate our heartfelt response to our ideals. It seems more than likely that climate change will get much more serious in our own lifetimes than we thought a few years ago. Bringing the political and ecological into our sense of Buddhist practice is not about following a new trend or being politically correct. It's about generating an appropriate depth of faith and inspiration in response to the situation.

When Charles and his brother John Wesley were crossing the Atlantic in 1736, their ship hit a big storm. Of course, in the age of the sailing ship, with no radio, no help nearby - in the middle of the ocean - this was terrifying. The sailors were doing all they could, but it was really in the balance as to whether the ship would go down, and all aboard perish - or not. In this situation, a small group of Moravian Christian men and women started to sing hymns. The brothers were struck by the hymn-singing, since this was not common in England at the time. But they were even more struck, and inspired, by the demeanour of the Moravians themselves. They were ordinary human beings, they were afraid - but they were also full of love, full of faith in their God, and their ideals. So in a significant way they were not afraid -

even in that terrible situation. Of course, this story has a happy ending. The ship reached America safely, Charles Wesley went on to write thousands of hymns.

The situation we are in probably won't have such a clear or simple ending. But perhaps we need that kind of faith. Our Buddhist collective rituals could focus more on generating faith in the face of the political and ecological situations, since it seems likely that we will need that sort of deep-founded positivity, in the challenges that lie ahead.

8. LOOKING FOR ALLIES, BUILDING NETWORKS OF ALLEGIANCE

The Battle of Cable Street: what would we have done?

1936 East London, and a group of British Fascists, wearing their distinctive black shirts, were preparing to march through East London, which at that time had a large population of Jewish people.¹ This march was to be an assertion of power and aggressive intention. The British Union of Fascists, led by Oswald Mosley, had similar authoritarian beliefs and policies to Hitler's National Socialists and Mussolini's Fascists - including violent and poisonous anti-semitism.

But the local East End people, of all kinds of backgrounds and cultures, took to the streets in large numbers, and resisted the Fascists' attempt to march down Cable Street. The police tried, with some violence, to force a way for the march through the protesters, but eventually gave up – and told the blackshirts to march away from the area. The local people had made it clear that the Fascists were not welcome, and the declaration of war with Germany eventually ensured that British Fascism had to go underground, at least for a while.

Of course, we aren't living in the 1930s, and the situation now is very different. Perhaps it seems extreme to imply that there might be any similarity between them. But in the last few years - in Europe, the UK and USA at least - the centre ground of politics has moved a long way towards the right-wing. The rise of politicians like

Donald Trump in the USA has gone along with policies and attitudes that used to be politically unacceptable becoming acceptable in the mainstream. Especially the



demonising of immigrants and holding them responsible for society's problems, in terms that sometimes fall into open racism, for example this cartoon in the UK's Daily Mail newspaper in 2015:

The increased popularity of 'alt-right' parties (for example UK Independence Party in the UK) has seemingly forced mainstream parties to take their policies seriously - or made it easier for them to do so. Many people are wondering what to think - even how to talk about this new political situation. The term 'alt-right' ('alternative-right') perhaps implies a new category of right-wing which isn't the same as the traditional far-right, but definitely goes beyond the traditional mainstream right wing. The term has a connotation of acceptability, as if what we're seeing is just another sort of right wing politics. But maybe alt-right isn't acceptable, maybe it just has a plausible

appearance of respectability. It used to be easy to dismiss the far right – with its images of men posing with guns and Nazi memorabilia. But perhaps the alt-right, with its apparent respectability and talk about rational concerns that need to be listened to – is in reality far more dangerous.

The rise of the alt-right highlights the difficulty of identifying what political leaders really stand for. Is a political leader conservative in a traditional sense, or alt-right, or neoliberal? Left wing in a traditional sense, or neoliberal-‘lite’? Populist, or just apparently populist? Who do they represent? Is it the people or business interests of their own country – or global big business? In some important ways, things just aren't as clear-cut as in the 1930s. Neoliberalism isn't the same as Nazism, though it is as ruthless. I think neoliberalism is fundamentally mostly about greed – but perhaps macho culture, and racism, are almost as essential. Neoliberalism might not be primarily racist, but it is happy to exploit the fears which give rise to racism for its most central purpose - which is to make the wealthy wealthier. Of course, rational concern about immigration and economic policy is not the same as racism. But in the UK (I believe) politicians, aided by the media, have successfully diverted attention onto immigration as if it were the cause of social problems and inequality which were in fact caused by neoliberal austerity measures.² And that does appear to have contributed to a great increase in hate crime, which is certainly racist.³

In achieving its goal, neoliberalism is happy to use whatever power works. So in that sense neoliberalism is an ideology without preferences, which can take on different guises. For example, Vladimir Putin makes a show of politics. In the past he has appeared to favour liberal human rights groups one week, another week neo-Nazi skinheads.⁴ Presidential campaigns give only the appearance of opposition or choice.⁵ Sowing confusion, planting disinformation, burying information, making an entertaining show of politics, squashing dissent - all assist big business in controlling the important issues: what's actually going to happen.

Very few people who support neoliberal policies, whether politicians or corporate leaders, would ever call themselves neoliberals. One of neoliberalism's greatest achievements was to present itself not as a belief system which can be debated, but as the truest manifestation of undeniable ‘fact’ – including the supposedly

competitive, greedy human nature implied by classical economics. Its other greatest achievement was to give itself a human face. Neoliberal politicians and corporate leaders look like reasonable human beings, who talk in an adult and responsible manner about the need to balance the books. And, after all, who is responsible for this awkward anachronism, this 'society' that Margaret Thatcher said doesn't exist, and which is surely on its way out? The corporations say they operate within the laws which are determined by democratically-elected politicians. The politicians say business will regulate itself. Everyone claims to be a good person, working with - rather than against - 'reality'.

So, it's confusing – no-one seems to have responsibility for society, and everyone seems credible. For example: a large number of scientists, environmentalist groups and even European politicians, say that neonicotinoid pesticides are decimating the bee populations we depend upon to fertilise crops - so neonicotinoids need to be banned. Pesticide manufacturers and farmer lobby groups claim these pesticides are not a problem and are economically necessary.⁶ Everyone can access the internet to find evidence which will back up their point of view - so there's no such thing as truth. The icecaps melt, the natural world degrades, and no-one is responsible.

But a little checking behind the headlines of the mainstream media shows a different picture – what corporations or politicians are doing, rather than what they say they are doing. Who is funding which 'think-tank', or fake grassroots campaign?⁷ In relation to climate change the concern of big business, and neoliberal politicians - judging by their actions rather than by what they say - is to make as much money as possible in the short term. Which almost always means 'business as usual' and increasing the stress on the biosphere - for example doing virtually nothing about curbing greenhouse gas emissions, and maintaining full support for extracting fossil fuels. If the super-rich have a personal plan for the future in relation to climate change, it would appear to be for them to make money from disaster capitalism, and then use economic power (backed up by military power) to buy their way out of trouble. In the USA at least, there is a growing industry providing private emergency services (such as firefighting)⁸ to the wealthy.

But this isn't about 'us' versus 'them'. At a personal level, some City bankers and CEOs might indeed be unpleasant, selfish and greedy. But there may be signs of some common ground emerging that there might be limitations to purely neoliberal policies – for example the 2016 IMF paper questioning neoliberalism.⁹ And, an acquaintance of mine has a friend who knows Theresa May - and says she is a nice person. I don't doubt that, or that someone can be intelligent and ethical and truly believe that neoliberal policies are best.

But nice people are always complex, and can support all kinds of things. The First World War seems to us now like a tragedy driven mainly by national rivalries, in which millions of people slaughtered each other for no good reason. Edward Thomas's 1915 poem on the First World War 'This is no petty case of right and wrong' is not entirely free of cognitive dissonance, but does suggest the poet's determination to set his passionate love of England above mere ethics. Though even from the evidence of the poem itself, I can't help suspecting that Thomas knew very well that there was little ethical basis for the war – that it was primarily about money and empire. The poem is, of course, just part of a complex situation. It was written after a furious row between Thomas and his father, who demonised the Germans. Thomas worked as a literary critic, had a wife and family, and there were considerable social pressures on men to join up and fight the Germans. So, intellectual justifications were only part of the story, but still significant factors in driving mature, intelligent, and ethical men like Thomas to France - to slaughter and be slaughtered for no good reason.

If the 1914 war now seems to us like collective delusion or even madness, surely we can never be wholly free from collective delusions. We need to question our own assumptions and stories, and to interrogate the realities behind media headlines. It's certainly significant who Donald Trump and Theresa May are in their personal lives, but personal qualities do not validate political policies. What really matters is what policies and systems do politicians in actual practice support, and what effects do those policies and systems actually have in the real world. As Buddhists perhaps we are particularly strong in seeing the complexities of situations, and in empathising with the opposite point of view. But those strengths can become rationalisations of sitting on the fence. It is good to look for genuine common ground, but it's not good to be naïvely trusting. There are situations in which we need to take a line on

something, even though we don't know everything about the situation – situations in which not opposing something becomes collusion with it. It's good to hold positions lightly, with awareness of complexity, and with readiness to review and change one's mind – but I believe there are things we need to oppose.

So what about that comparison with the 1930s, and the Battle of Cable Street? Given that neoliberalism really became influential in the 1980s, it would be unreasonable to blame it for climate change. But big business has done so much to prevent meaningful action on climate change, and on reducing other harmful effects of modern life on the biosphere. The neoliberal economic model is also having a devastating effect on societies, and is assisting the rise of far-right populism and authoritarianism. All that is causing a great deal of suffering, and will cause far more.

Maybe it is appropriate to ask ourselves: what would we have done, if we'd been living in the East End of London in 1936? Or perhaps in Amsterdam when the Germans invaded and occupied in 1940? Would we have submitted, collaborated, or resisted? What does it mean to be a member of society when the State is imposing fracking in your neighbourhood, or someone else's neighbourhood - which is likely to poison the groundwater?¹⁰ When big business globally, and the politics that serves big business, is threatening the Earth's living systems? Is it enough to get on with our personal meditation practice, and perhaps teach others? What is wise resistance, and what is collusion with oppression? No, it's not the same situation, but there are telling points of similarity - and if our alarm bells are ringing, they should be.

Buddhist responses: gradualism versus activism

As we saw earlier, all the traditional Buddhist practices are (I would say) forms of resistance to neoliberal ideology and its effects. Likewise any ethical or kind action - which might be particularly exemplified in occupations such as nursing or teaching, but which happen every day between friends or colleagues, or within families, or even between strangers. We can practise ethics in how we live our personal lives, and in how we live in our local community or work within our community of spiritual practitioners. We can be progressives, in progressive states of mind.

But it seems not inconceivable that the authoritarianism and repression current in Russia and Turkey (for example) might spread to the rest of Europe, the UK, and USA. If that happened, Buddhists in the latter countries might be pushed into doing little more than preserving their understanding of Buddhism. If that's what happens, then fair enough - we'll just have to preserve the teachings, and maybe resist creatively in any way that we can. But, whilst we have the opportunity, it would seem a good idea to do our best to prevent that future from coming true.

What does 'doing our best' mean? As we've seen, there is a range of positive responses to the political and ecological crisis. There's getting on with one's personal lifestyle as spiritual practice (including awareness of the ethics around resources). There's spreading the Buddhist teachings - which helps transform society in a positive direction, perhaps emphasising building communal resilience in the face of climate change. And there's activism and speaking out as spiritual practice, aiming to promote systemic change: locally, nationally or globally.

Perhaps climate change and neoliberalism are, at root, spiritual problems, needing spiritual responses. To me, all the above seem needed, and valid responses to the situation. As Joanna Macy suggested: we need holding actions to defend the natural world, we need to change our systems and institutions (or build different ones), and we need a big shift of perceptions and consciousness.

Perhaps the tragedy is, that change takes time, and the situation – especially in relation to climate change and the biosphere – is urgent. Centrism, meaning pseudo-reasonableness, splitting the difference, not getting excited – is, I believe, not actually appropriate. Always taking the middle way between extremes means being controlled by whoever sets the terms of the debate. What actually needs to happen is not tweaking, but radical and rapid change.

Also, there appears to be almost no self-restraint within neoliberalism itself. It seems like a machine for increasing social inequality and stressing the Earth's living systems that just won't stop – until something makes it stop. The drive for endless economic growth has always had a predatory and ruthless aspect. There have always been 'sacrifice zones' – peoples and places suffering the sharp end of wealth-creation.¹¹ In the past, the most extreme suffering tended to be located a long way from the

wealthy countries. For example, slavery was in the Caribbean, famine was in India, massacre was in the Congo. But in the desperate scrabble for more profits, there are signs of the sacrifice zones coming home to the wealthy countries themselves. Hurricane Katrina showed the suffering of a whole section of US society (particularly low-income people of colour) being treated as a business opportunity. And, particularly in the USA and UK, fracking is threatening water sources, and urban pollution seriously affecting air quality – resources common to rich and poor alike. In some ways, neoliberalism manifests the myth told about sharks – when it runs out of prey it will try to eat itself.

But looking hard at either activist or more gradualist responses tends to show that both are needed. Trying to promote systemic change, one comes up against the fact that people, at all levels of society, don't want or see the need for change. On the other hand, teaching meditation (for example) only immediately influences those who want to learn meditation, who often already see the need for change – and might anyway seem a rather long-term response in the face of runaway climate change.

The problem is that for the big changes to happen, hearts and minds need to change - and change is an organic process which happens in many ways, all of which take time. And the distinction between activism and gradualism is itself to an extent false anyway. Political activism can in practice amount to many conversations with people who don't share your point of view (for example) – which can certainly feel like gradualism. On the other hand, something as gradualist as writing a story celebrating compassion can end up contributing to systemic change – as happened with Dickens's A Christmas Carol.

But I believe contemporary Buddhism needs to make more space for activism within its sense of what spiritual practice can be. As David Loy points out in his talk 'Is climate change a crisis for Buddhism?',¹² working in hospices or prisons or other forms of social engagement have long been seen as legitimate Dharma practice. But asking why there are so many people in prison (for example) is often seen as 'political' as in 'not Dharma practice'. Loy quotes Hélder Câmara (Brazilian archbishop and advocate of liberation theology): 'when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist'.

What would the Buddha do, if he were alive today? I like to think he would do something surprising – since genius tends to be unpredictable. What strikes me about his actual life is that he responded to people he met, and to his times, in many different ways - appropriately to the situations he found himself in. He certainly didn't just teach meditation and spiritual principles or practices. He argued with Brahmins (powerful people), he mediated between tribes about to go to war, he taught spiritual truth to kings, he cleaned up a sick monk, he spoke out against the caste system. So the Buddha wasn't just a great teacher and exemplar of practical ethics – he was also politically outspoken, he questioned the system itself.

One person might respond in many different ways over time, through both activist and gradualist activities. And we are what we are, to some extent. We all have different abilities, temperaments, needs and drives – different things to give. It's probably not advisable to ride roughshod over our own natures: we can't simply wish ourselves into being a red-hot activist, or a meditation teacher – if that's really not us.

But in the end, we are in a certain situation. As the activist slogan has it: 'to change everything we need everyone'. There's an urgent need right now for ordinary people to get as much involved as they can in pushing for systemic change. And this is all the more important given the possibility of authoritarianism closing down activism.

Is there any point to activism?

One way of looking at this is to consider the lengths that authoritarian regimes go to crush activism or dissent of any kind. In 2015 the Russian authorities sentenced Ildar Dadin to three years prison - for peaceful street protests.¹³ Boris Nemtsov, one of the most prominent opposition politicians and critics of Vladimir Putin was gunned down in front of the Kremlin in 2015, but whoever ordered his assassination have not been caught so far.¹⁴ Globally, especially in South America, there is a tragically long list of environmental activists who have been murdered.¹⁵

All these people were doing was expressing their opinions using peaceful means. So why the violent response? If activism and dissent have no effect, why go to that

much trouble? Why bother disappearing or locking up politicians or journalists that express dissent, if dissent has no effect? Why such a thorough control of and saturation of the media, so that only one world seems possible?

Perhaps it is only politicians and corporate leaders who really understand where their power comes from. They understand that dissent is dangerous. Even recent history shows that the most powerful regimes can topple. On occasion, just a few people speaking out can start an avalanche, in which large sections of a country's population take to the streets. Armies and security forces are made of human beings, who can change their minds, and change sides.

Activism can be both very creative, and effective in achieving its aims. The campaigning group Liberate Tate held many unauthorised 'performances' in the Tate Modern art gallery (London) over 6 years. In one action ('Timepiece') 75 performers occupied the gallery for 24 hours, and covered its white floor with waves of charcoal scribbling – texts to do with the natural world and time running out.¹⁶ In another action – 'Human Cost' at Tate Britain, 'oil' was ritually poured over the naked body of a young man lying curled up on the gallery floor.¹⁷ These striking images and actions were well-reported in the UK's national media, raised awareness of the issues, and eventually succeeded in ending BP's sponsorship of the Tate in 2016.

TTIP - the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, a trade agreement proposed between the EU and USA – was an attempt to remove almost any regulation on corporations. Democratically-elected governments which passed legislation deemed to have reduced corporate profits would have been subject to heavy fines, imposed by shadowy international courts made up of corporate apparatchiks. Its effect would have been to reduce European safety standards, working conditions and pay to standards current in the USA. The efforts of neoliberal politicians and corporate leaders to get this accepted by EU governments included (for a long time) keeping the actual details of the agreement secret, known only to the government and corporation officials. But determined international campaigning, especially in Germany, eventually prevailed, and TTIP was dead.

So, this story suggests that determined, mass campaigning can work. But it also serves as a warning. TTIP as such is dead, but the UK has already signed up to CETA

(Comprehensive and Economic Trade Agreement)¹⁸ – which appears to be effectively TTIP by another name.¹⁹

Political engagement as spiritual practice

So, given the big picture politically and ecologically, we might wish to bring a bit more political edge to our spiritual practice. Within our personal lifestyle, maybe we could think in terms of devoting one evening per week (or more) to some form of progressivist activism, whether at local, national or international level. Naming some ideas almost at random: a local park might need saving from being sold off for building luxury flats, there's campaigning against the arms trade, or against glyphosate pesticides,²⁰ or an institution could be encouraged to divest from fossil fuels.²¹ We could do these things as spiritual practice, working with our friends. We could travel with our friends, and support each other during an anti-fracking action.²² We could cycle together to the yearly Ende Gelände²³ action in Germany, and help shut down a coal mine at least temporarily. Perhaps we could do some sightseeing and meeting up with friends during the trip. Perhaps we can devise whole new forms of Buddhist activism which go beyond simply meditating in public, creative as that may be.

As well as contributing to resistance that is already going on, or initiating new campaigns, perhaps Buddhists could learn from the experience and skills of non-Buddhist campaigners. The group BP or not BP? campaigns against BP's sponsorship of museums and galleries in London – particularly by unauthorised performances in the British Museum. They use theatrical performance, spectacle, songs and speeches to draw attention to the ethical issues of global warming, energy policy and corporate infiltration of public space – but in a very engaging, family-friendly and non-confrontational way. They aim to promote a certain point of view, but also to engage members of the public in dialogue.²⁴

Activism can provide crucial situations, where one might come to understand oneself better, or find oneself having to dig deeper for a creative response. Activists have devised many creative forms of resistance and campaigning. Some have drawn on carnival and the power of laughter (or the power of gospel, as in the USA's Reverend

Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping).²⁵ Some have taken the forms of corporate advertising and subverted them to express progressive ideas ('brandalism'). There are many examples of creative activism in classical music, theatre and the arts.²⁶ Buddhists could draw on this rich tradition in devising their own new Buddhist forms.

Buddhists have skills, qualities and perspectives which could be very helpful to, and are already appreciated by, non-Buddhist campaigners. Some form of confrontation is implicit in any act of criticism or resistance, and qualities such as calm and mindful self-awareness can be valuable in activist situations, as well as skilful speech. Clarity and confidence about ideals, faith and inspiration are of course not the sole preserve of Buddhism. But in the longer term, a spiritual perspective might enable Buddhist practitioners to make valuable contributions to the work of the environmental and progressive movements.

Strategy, tactics – and politics

Assuming you want to do more along these lines – how to decide amongst the many possible ways of engaging? I would suggest that it's certainly worth considering what your own talents and passions are – they are an important part of what we can contribute. It's also important to consider what works for you, what inspires you, especially long term. But it might also be good to think about where your contribution might have the biggest effect. It can be good to go on marches, for example. But rather than just joining a 'one-off' action, it might be even better to think in terms of joining or starting a campaign to achieve something specific, perhaps even long-term.

You might be thinking that the corporations have so much power now, that there is no point trying to promote systemic change via traditional politics. Syriza in Greece tried to resist pressure from the EU to adopt neoliberal austerity measures in 2015, and were crushed. On the other hand, that's just one example, and if there were enough progressive movements influencing governments globally, there would be some real systemic change. Also, it can be surprising how progressivism and neoliberalism can co-exist. Germany was one of the countries forcing austerity measures on Greece – but it is also a country which dropped nuclear power (due to pressure from German citizens), and is one of the foremost countries in the world for

community groups taking back control of local energy from corporations and moving towards renewables.²⁷

There are always the traditional dangers (with politics) of ethical over-compromise, in-fighting, and getting burnt-out with overwork. On the other hand, it is still (so far) a place where national and international policies and even ethics can be discussed. And, one way or another, surely it's extremely important that ethical ideals and wiser perspectives are publicly upheld.

Not just for the young: for everyone

One of the most striking images from activism in recent years was a photograph of a young policeman, in full riot gear including clear plastic shield and helmet. He is confronting, is right up against, a very old lady - and she is holding up a mirror for him to see himself. And he does look embarrassed.

Now, I'm very aware that older people can be physically and mentally vulnerable - and I'm not suggesting that they should put themselves at risk in obviously dangerous situations. But I am suggesting that they might want to get involved in activism, in ways that work for them. For a start, in modern societies older people are an important demographic factor - there are many of them in proportion to the rest of the population. And they are more likely to vote than younger people, so politicians do need to bear them in mind.²⁸ Also, older people in general have less to lose than younger people: they aren't trying to get trained for a job, or to get on the property ladder, or having to provide for children. So older people needn't be so worried about getting a criminal record - whilst they might well wish to fight for a better world for their children and grandchildren.



In 2017 a 73 year-old grandmother locked herself into a human chain, including her partner, her son, and her grand-daughter – to delay work on Cuadrilla’s fracking site near Blackpool, UK. As well as being a grandmother, Gillian Kelly is a psychotherapist, who had no involvement in activism until 2015. But she now feels it’s imperative to take action in defence of the planet, and of future generations.²⁹

It’s very important that ordinary, respectable members of society get involved in activism, so that it becomes much more difficult for politicians and business leaders to criminalise dissent, and to claim that the only opposition to neoliberal policies comes from crazy, dangerous anarchists. Maybe only an international ‘movement of movements’ of ordinary people will achieve any meaningful moderation of international corporate influence.

Global power and global resistance

Perhaps there is a special importance to national and international campaigns, and to giving support to campaigns going on globally. In Greece in 2015 the European business community showed that it can and will bring a country to its knees, if that country refuses to implement neoliberal austerity measures. Global corporations are

powerful individually, and even more collectively, because of their huge wealth. Part of their power derives from their internationality. If one country allows unions to oppose the way a particular corporation treats its workers, that corporation can threaten to move its operation or investment elsewhere - which it often can easily do. So, far from standing up to the corporations, countries can get involved in a 'race to the bottom' - in which countries compete to offer the biggest tax break, or the most abjectly compliant workforce, which will put up with the least pay and worst working conditions.

So traditional democratic politics – operating at the level of a single nation state – is not well-suited to negotiating with global corporations. And so far, there has been little success in efforts to enforce social responsibility onto corporations internationally or globally – including in relation to pay and conditions for workers. Although there have been exceptions - such as the international struggle by Walmart workers.³⁰

Progressive activism crosses many boundaries, since environmental and political issues tend to be linked in their nature, and to have a global dimension. The First Nation people facing pollution of their hunting and fishing territories by the Alberta tar sands project in Canada have much in common with the Ogale and Bille people facing similar pollution in the Niger Delta. Both have something in common with global campaigns trying to end fossil fuel extraction because of climate change. And all three have something in common with anti-racism activism, and campaigns to reduce the influence of big business in politics.

It can be good to draw attention to the global dimension of whatever campaigning one might be doing, or to express solidarity with or support for other progressive campaigns we have a connection with. BP or not BP?'s main focus has been ending BP's sponsorship of prestigious institutions such as the British Museum in London. But it has also supported museum staff in their fight against privatisation, and for decent pay and conditions of work – since ultimately these campaigns are different manifestations of the same struggle.

Who are we, and who might our friends be?

Even in the last fifty years, modern society has become significantly more atomised, the importance of community or family in most people's lives has significantly decreased. Most of us live in cities or towns, often having little connection with the people living physically near to us. We tend very much to surround ourselves with our own 'bubble' of friends, who tend to think the same way that we do. Perhaps contemporary Buddhism has played into this trend to some extent? If we identify as Buddhist, we tend to live in a Buddhist world. There will be people of other faiths, political persuasions, social backgrounds, living in our town - but we just won't tend to meet them, because we don't have to. The way the modern world is, we don't have to get along with other groups of people, we just stay in our bubble - whether on Facebook or otherwise.

But if we don't want to live in a more authoritarian and repressive society, maybe we should get to know our neighbours, consider who our friends might be, and work more with them on common goals. When fracking came to the village of Balcombe, UK, it was striking how opposition to it united people who previously seemed to have little in common: very conservative landowners, very hippy eco-activists, and many ordinary people with no previous history of activism.

I would argue that all that is just realpolitik; a pragmatic concern for our own freedom and wellbeing. But there might be a deeper aspect to the idea of looking for allies. Who, and what, are we? Given that (probably) we aren't Enlightened, that means we have some changing to do, if we are to grow spiritually. If we have changing to do, then some questioning of who we think we are, and of what we are doing, would seem to be in order. We might describe ourselves as Buddhists, but what does that really mean? I don't mean anything very philosophically sophisticated. I just mean that, under the pressure of these times, we might find we have more in common with, say, Greenpeace or Black Lives Matter - than we had thought.

There are many possibilities, but some issues bring into focus so many important areas that alliances and collaboration become particularly natural. The plight of refugees and immigration policy is one such. There is every reason to feel compassion for people who are suffering so much. But as the refugee crisis is being exacerbated by climate change and food shortages, it stands at the heart of global

environmental, political and race issues. It dramatically confronts us with these issues, in very human form. Are we happy with a world of such obscene, and obscenely-increasing, inequality? In which people, often of colour, are denied the basics of a decent life in their own countries, and then denied access to a better life in wealthier countries? The same countries which bear a greater responsibility for climate change, and which maintain the neoliberal economic world order driving global inequality?

I think that if we find out more about what's going on, and go back to the principles of Buddhism, we might realise that we need to do more activism. Putting it another way, we might reach a more authentic practice of Buddhism, through how we respond to this situation. Looking at it optimistically, maybe we are right now part of what Joanna Macy called The Great Turning: turning away from the Industrial Growth Society, and towards the Life Sustaining Society. Putting it another way, perhaps we are part of what might be termed a crisis of identity for humanity. Perhaps our relationship with the natural world has, in truth, always been an important part of who we are. We've come to have an unconscious sense of overlordship, of mastery over the natural world, and perhaps of entitlement to a certain way of life. But the natural world is waking us up from that delusion, and pushing us away from the centre of the world we have created in our minds. Maybe we humans will respond positively to this shock, and eventually develop more mature relating with ourselves, each other, and with the natural world. Maybe Buddhism could help with that process. If so, surely we will need to access our deepest sense of what it means to be a Buddhist.

The question of hope

The global ecological and political situation looks challenging, to put it mildly. I think it's very natural to ask: is there any hope? Aren't things, overall, getting worse - and isn't that going to continue for the foreseeable future?

Surely the situation is extremely complicated. One would need to somehow assess vast quantities of data, covering many subject areas, to even begin to answer those questions. Sure, lots of bad things exist, and are growing - but the same is true of good things. All kinds of tyrannies look monolithic and unchallengeable, until one day they suddenly and surprisingly fall. Perhaps the wisest policy in relation to these

questions is not to ask them, or try to answer them. To focus on what good things are growing, to give our energy to those: to develop positive emotion and faith.

George Monbiot, in his book Out of the Wreckage: a New Politics for an Age of Crisis, proposes a new politics of belonging. Power to be devolved down to local communities as much as possible, including ownership and management of natural resources. National and global decision-making to be far more responsive to the needs and worldviews of most people than they are now – helping us to live within the limits of the natural world. Thick networks could be stimulated at small scale – initiatives responsive to local needs which spawn other initiatives, leading to a culture of much greater participation and stronger communities. Change from the bottom up – and a more compassionate and resilient society. Some of these ideas are already manifesting in the municipalist movement around the world, for example Barcelona in Spain, Ciudad Futura in Argentina, the ‘Indy Towns’ in the UK. An important part of this movement is what has been called the ‘feminisation of politics’. This starts with including women in politics at all levels, but also tries to do politics differently - partly by including the small, everyday and personal. It emphasises inclusion, cooperation and pragmatism rather than competition and abstract ideological purity.³¹

Monbiot is the opposite of an impractical dreamer. In a way, his most profound point is very simple - that neoliberal values, worldview and policies are not in fact popular at all. They are being imposed on society by a small but powerful minority – and this dynamic is increasingly being seen for what it is. One example of this is the history of Podemos in Spain. What started in sheer dissatisfaction with inequality and austerity, as the ‘indignados’ took over city squares, became an Occupy-style movement – which became a political party strongly challenging business as usual. Senator Bernie Sanders narrowly failed to become the Democrat candidate in the 2016 USA Presidential election – on an entirely idealistic and progressive platform, and with (comparatively speaking) almost no money behind him. Despite the system being heavily weighted against him, he got that far because his policies were extremely popular, 100,000 volunteers were happy to work long hours unpaid, and they managed to speak to 75 million voters.³²

There are signs that this political and ecological crisis holds great opportunities as well as great dangers. Perhaps it's time for the majority who oppose neoliberal policies to reach out to each other, and press for systemic change. Perhaps Buddhists, in the wealthy countries at least, and certainly including myself, have a tendency to over-introspection – which we urgently need to work with in this historical moment. As Akuppa (a Buddhist deeply experienced in ecological, spiritual and political issues) put it: 'the depth and vitality of any Buddhist sangha is in direct proportion to the extent that that sangha is alive to the world around it'. Perhaps Buddhists need to reach out beyond the sangha more: respecting real differences, and acknowledging shared values. Connecting with other people and shared inspirations: opening and keeping on opening. Staying true to Buddhist values and going with the process: opening to the power, and mystery, of community.

The question of hope makes me think of an enigmatic piece of music. At a certain point in Sibelius's Fifth Symphony, a simple theme breaks out. The symphony does in fact prepare for and build up to this theme - but it always seems somehow surprising to me. There is a story behind it. Apparently one day Sibelius saw 16 swans flying above his house (in a very beautiful part of Finland). He wrote: 'Lord God, that beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming, silver ribbon'. Three days later they reappeared, and he wrote: 'strange to learn that nothing in the whole world affects me – nothing in art, literature or music – in the same way as do these swans and cranes and wild geese. Their voices and being'. This experience inspired him to write what he called his 'swan hymn', and weave it into his symphony.

There is no 'correct' meaning for Sibelius's 'swan hymn' - there are a number of popular interpretations - and probably every person's response is subtly different. Sibelius himself, and his music, had connections with Finnish nationalism. So this theme could be seen as celebrating Finnish self-determination against Russian imperialism.

For me, this music has a very existential feeling. The theme seems triumphant and celebratory, but perhaps with a hint of sadness. Perhaps it's a celebration of life, in the face of impermanence? A Romantic celebration with no reason - the human spirit simply asserting itself? As if Sibelius had a deep-hearted sense and acceptance of all the beauty and joy that life can bring – but at the same time its fragility and

impermanence. And it's hard to look at, but surely we are in a very existential situation. We are threatening the living systems of the Earth, and our own survival as a species. All life seems so beautiful, and yet so threatened. Maybe we could take inspiration from this music. We could embrace the extreme contradictions and uncertainty, look reality in the face, celebrate - and do what we can.

List of abbreviations

BP	British Petroleum
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
IMF	International Monetary Fund
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

APPENDIX 1: BRIEF GUIDES TO MEDITATION AND REFLECTION PRACTICES

Setting up and ending meditation practices

For the following meditations, find a sitting posture you can maintain comfortably without moving for 10 or 20 minutes. Either on a chair - or cross-legged on the

ground, with a cushion or two under your bottom for support. You will probably need to experiment to get the height right. Keep a reasonably straight back, perhaps tuck your chin very slightly towards your chest. Decide how long you want to sit for, and set a timer to bring the practice to an end. Close your eyes, and try to stay completely still.

Become aware of your whole body - explore throughout your physical experience with your mind. If you find any physical tension, for example in your face, abdomen or shoulders - try to let it relax. Internally, ask yourself how you're feeling: listen in your heart for any response. Accept whatever you seem to be feeling, whether it's pleasant, painful or neutral. Become aware of any thoughts that might be passing through your mind, but try not to follow them up - just notice them and let them go. As preparation for the practice, bring kindness to mind, see if there is any response to that notion in your heart.

When the timer goes off at the end of the practice, continue sitting for a moment or two, or a few minutes - noticing the effects of the practice, and mentally preparing for whatever you're doing next.

Mindfulness meditation

Become aware of your physical breathing process. Not trying to change it in any way, just let it be as it is. Just observe your breathing, perhaps focussing on one aspect such as nose, mouth, chest or whatever. Hold it in a gentle relaxed mental focus. Your mind will probably drift off into thinking or imagery at some point - no problem, just gently guide it back to awareness of the breathing.

Some of the thoughts might seem important, but let them go anyway - they will come back later. Give yourself this time to be with yourself.

Pure awareness meditation

Become aware of any thoughts that might be passing through your mind, but try not to follow them up - just notice them and let them go. Now - just carry on sitting still, and notice what your mind does. Don't try to control your mind, apart from

one rule: don't get caught up in thinking, just notice thoughts passing through your mind like clouds through the sky.

Just sit, in pure awareness of your feelings, thoughts, body, whatever sounds are going on around you. You'll probably notice your awareness moving around between different aspects of your experience - just let it.

Loving-kindness meditation

This is the loving-kindness which doesn't want anything in return for its love - it just wants people to be truly well and happy.

This practice has four stages: try to give roughly equal amounts of time to each.

Cultivating kindness towards yourself: imagine yourself as a baby, in your own arms. Be aware of how your heart is responding. Wish yourself well: repeat 'may I be well, may I be happy' in a kindly tone of voice in your mind. After each repetition leave a pause and check for any response in your heart. If that doesn't work for you, try saying the words 'kindness', or 'love'. You might be feeling resistant to the practice, or just neutral - which is fine. Even the most subtle heart-responses are very important.

Now bring to mind a good friend - either through a visual image of them, or maybe saying their name to yourself in your mind. Wish them well: repeat 'may they be well, may they be happy' in a kindly tone of voice in your mind. After each repetition leave a pause and check for any response in your heart.

Now bring to mind someone you know, who you don't naturally like, or perhaps are having some kind of difficulty with. Choose someone so that the practice will be a little bit challenging, but don't be too ambitious - the point is to encourage some positive emotion, not to overwhelm yourself. Acknowledge however you're feeling about them, but wish them well anyway. Perhaps bring to mind that they are a human being - they too feel pleasure and pain. In your mind, in a kindly tone of voice repeat 'may they be well, may they be happy'. After each repetition leave a pause and check for any response in your heart.

Now bring all three of you to mind, perhaps imagine that you are sitting in a circle together. Try to imagine feeling equal kindness, for each person in turn. Notice how your heart responds. Maybe bring to mind that each of you is a human being. Now imagine yourself radiating kindness in all directions: to all beings everywhere.

Reflection on impermanence

Rather than getting into meditation posture, set things up so you won't be disturbed for about 20 minutes, and just sit quietly.

Become aware of your mind and body, and how you're feeling. Reflect on the qualities of loving-kindness for a few minutes.

There are many ways to reflect on impermanence. You might try simply paying sustained attention to what you can hear, and noticing that it's changing all the time. From time to time you might remind yourself of that fact, and of what you are doing (since it's likely your mind will drift away from the practice at some point) - by saying to yourself 'it's changing'. Be very aware of even the subtlest emotional responses you have to this - whatever they might be.

Or you might try observing your own mind, in a similar way. You'll probably notice thoughts coming and going: emotions, images. You could say to yourself, from time to time: 'I'm changing'. You might encourage yourself with part of a teaching the Buddha once gave: 'in the seen, only the seen, in the heard, only the heard'. Or you could do the same thing, but more conceptually: reflecting on your whole life since birth - being aware that you have been, and are, changing. Be aware of your heart-responses.

Setting up short solitary retreat at home

Don't be over-ambitious. Start with a short period that you are sure you feel comfortable with. For some people that first period might really be just an hour or two. For others, that first period might be half a day, a whole day, or even a weekend. But the principle is: start from what you feel comfortable with, and build

up slowly, as you feel appropriate. Over weeks, months or years (as appropriate) you might build up from a few hours to a few days. At some point it might feel OK to try a whole week.

Tell friends and family what you are doing. If appropriate, perhaps agree some way of them being able to get hold of you if really necessary. Generally ensure, as far as reasonably possible, that you won't be disturbed. Decide what you're going to do if someone knocks on the door. Ensure you have enough food so that you won't need go out. Turn off your mobile or personal computer - maybe put an explanatory voicemail on your mobile and auto reply message on your email account.

Ideally, don't read, or listen to music or watch films. Try not to occupy yourself, or distract yourself from your experience with input. Meditate as much or as little as seems helpful, but don't leave it too long between sessions - they help you to keep yourself on track. Otherwise just sit and reflect, or just sit and stare at the sky (or whatever). Keep an eye on yourself and look after yourself, do what you need to do when you need to do it.

Setting up one week (or longer) solitary

There are many solitary retreat venues on offer (see goingonretreat.com). But I'd suggest booking with one of the Buddhist retreat centres which have solitary huts in the grounds or nearby.

For a start, you will be in a space dedicated to supporting your practice, where the people around understand what you're doing and won't disturb you. In the event of any practical problem, the retreat centre team will probably be able to sort it out. If you're going for longer than a week, the retreat centre team will supply you with food, rather than you having to leave the retreat to go shopping. If you did get into any kind of serious emotional or other difficulty, again the retreat centre team would be able to give you emergency support.

As with shorter solitaires, start with what's comfortable, and build up slowly. It's not necessarily like learning to ride a bicycle - where once you've learned the technique, you can more or less ride any distance. You might feel fine with one or two weeks, but to then go straight to a month or two might be very challenging.

Working with solitary conditions

It's important to bear in mind, that whatever we experience on solitaries is us. No-one else is there, there's no-one to blame for whatever state we might be in. We bring our patterns with us, and in these conditions we tend to see them very clearly.

Our mental patterns as they manifest during the retreat become very obvious, but as we reflect on our lives, we might come to see ourselves, other people, and our relationships with them much more clearly too. This can be quite challenging - in this situation and without support from friends, we have to 'own' past mistakes, and whatever negativity we might have brought to a past situation, for example.

But this process, of becoming clearer and more realistic about ourselves and others, tends to clear away obstacles to empathy, and so can enable a sense of deeper connection with someone. Clearly, the accuracy of any new insights about someone else's experience would need to be checked out with that person - but it can sometimes seem like we are looking through someone else's eyes for the first time.

Many people, when they experience solitary retreat conditions for the first time, experience some variety of quite strong anxiety. Many people suffer from an irrational fear of the dark, or of being attacked. Or perhaps just a raw anxiety, with no particular cause or underlying story. Or, we can get obsessed by some memory, or thought, or something that we think we need to sort out for some reason.

It can be very hard to do this, but we need to distinguish between healthy reflection, and unhealthy obsessing (or rumination). And between legitimate concern, and irrational anxiety. Often, our bodily experience can at least give us a clue. Obsessive thinking is often accompanied by quite painful physical tension, maybe in the face or abdomen. More generally, our thinking always has an emotional 'feeling-tone' - a subtle emotional flavour, which we can train ourselves to look out for.

We need to ask ourselves what kind of thinking we are doing, and if we are 'doing' obsession, or irrational anxiety - we need to stop doing it, and stay stopped. Again, this can be hard to do. Personally, if I'm on solitary, as soon as I realise that my

mind is going (or has already gone) down this road of obsessive or negative thinking, I say to myself 'fantasy' - and use that as a cue to just stop. Even focussing your mind on counting to a large number might be helpful, or visualising a journey you're very familiar with. Obsessive thinking tends to keep on returning, but just be patient and keep letting it go - it will give up eventually. It might be helpful to try lying flat and absolutely still for a while, just becoming aware of your body and letting your mind become quiet.

Don't push yourself too hard. If you are able to have reasonably calm and emotionally-positive meditations, then maybe you are basically OK - even if you are somewhat stressed between meditations. But if you're stressed all day every day, and you're just holding on with gritted teeth, then maybe the situation you are in is too much for you right now. An eminent practitioner once said to me: 'if it's all getting a bit much, get yourself to the nearest cafe and have some eggs and chips'. In other words, take a break if you need to, or seek out communication and support, or even just leave and go home.

APPENDIX 2: RESOURCES

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Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement: <http://www.thedancewebsite.org>

Ecodharma retreat centre, Catalunya, Spain. Courses, retreats and events which support the realisation of our human potential and the development of an ecological consciousness honouring our mutual belonging within the web of life.

<http://www.ecodharma.com>

Free Buddhist Audio: thousands of free talks and texts on Buddhism
<https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com>

Triratna Buddhist Community: urban teaching centres and communities around the world. Online resources at <https://thebuddhistcentre.com>

Wildmind: online meditation resources and teaching available.
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The forcible liquidation of such a journal-a theoretical review concerned with the theatre, say-is not just an impoverishment of its particular readers. It is not even merely a severe blow to theatrical culture. It is simultaneously, and above all, the liquidation of a particular organ through which society becomes aware of itself and hence it is an interference, hard to describe in exact terms, in the complex system of circulation, exchange, and conversion of nutrients that maintain life in that many-

layered organism which is society today. It is a blow against the natural dynamic of the processes going on within that organism; a disturbance of the balanced interplay of all its many functions, an interplay reflecting the level of complexity reached by society's anatomy. And just as the chronic deficiency of a vitamin (amounting in quantitative terms only to a negligible fraction of the human diet) can make a person ill, so, in the long run, the loss of a single periodical can cause the social organism far more damage than would appear at first sight.'

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to the healing of land that has been damaged, preparing the way for returning health and biodiversity.



18 May 2018