

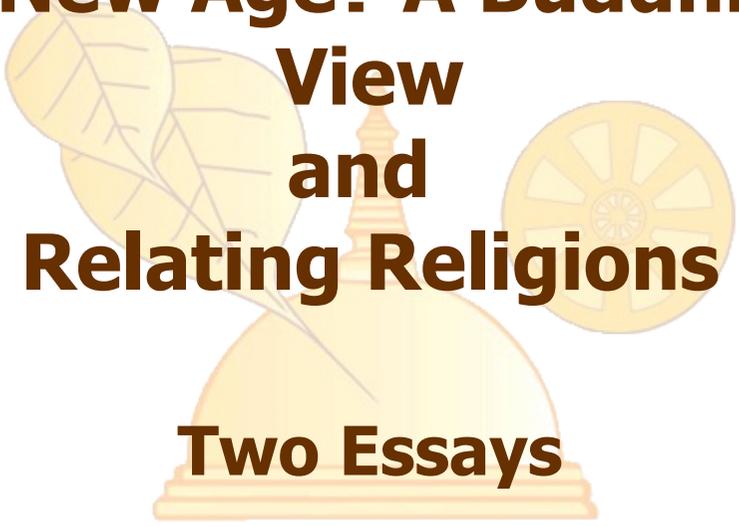
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**A New Age?
A Buddhist View
And
Relating Religions**

*Two Essays by
Bhikkhu Khantipalo*



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A “New Age?” A Buddhist View

People these days talk much of a “new age” that is just about to dawn. Perhaps most of them are young—one does not hear so much about this from the older generations. Certainly there is enough written on the subject and enough said by those who believe that a new age is just about to come. According to one’s views this new age has various names. One, the “Age of Aquarius,” is often mentioned. But what are its characteristics?

The most outstanding point about this age is the renewal of spiritual endeavour coupled with greater efforts by people to live in harmony together. These points are made over and over again, and there is no denying that they are both very necessary. The question is, however, do we find this happening to any great extent in this world?

If one is an optimist, and perhaps rather too idealistic, then the answer is “Yes!” The optimist can cite the many new centres for spiritual growth found in Western-type societies, as well as increased attention paid to meditation and prayer in some

Eastern countries. There are indeed today all sorts of communities and groups, centres and foundations for the promotion of a wide range of wholesome activities aimed at integration, spiritual growth and harmony. And certainly this trend is growing stronger all the time.

The pessimist, though, will answer “No!” He cannot see many signs of a “new age” or of a growth in spiritual matters. He can rightly point out two most disastrous wars in this century, with the likelihood of a third one even more terrible. Then there are the unrivalled evils done by twisted megalomaniacs who gained political power, such as Hitler and Stalin. Finally he can say quite truly that materialism is steadily eroding all spiritual values (in Buddhist countries too!) and that more people are influenced by this than are engaged in any “new age” pursuits.

Now what would a Buddhist say? Is there a brave new world coming? And what sort will it be? A Buddhist is one who views things realistically. He does not see only one side of a question and he looks for a solution in terms of cause and effect. In this way he can agree with the optimist when he points out all those encouraging signs in Western societies and more traditional lands. But he would have to discriminate carefully the causes which merely bring about the temporary improvement of spiritual conditions for

some groups of people in some countries, from those which will change the whole world.

It is interesting to note in this respect that one hears most about a “new age” from the highly developed countries where many young people have turned away from the gross materialism of their parents’ generation and seek something more deeply satisfying. Little indeed upon a new age is to be heard from India, Africa and South America. When you don’t have enough food, clothes and shelter, a new age does not seem likely to be about to happen. Also, “new age” views do not tie in well with traditional Hindu beliefs which describe the present Kali Yuga, the Age of Iron, as degenerate and not due to change for a long time yet. Buddhist views on this will be discussed below.

Also, a Buddhist would have to point out to his optimistic friend that even in materially advanced countries the numbers of people actually engaged in promoting some more spiritual approach to life is small in comparison to the population. It is true that the numbers are growing but will they be sufficient to alter the well established norms of society?

While the Buddhist would disagree on evidence with the optimist, he could also not go all the way with the pessimist, especially if the latter says:

“There’s no way to change human beings.” The pessimist looks only on the dark side and will not see the signs of spiritual growth. But when the pessimist says: “What about those countries—and they are increasing in number—where any religious activity is frowned on, if not actually persecuted?” here a Buddhist has to agree that in large areas of the world, spiritual goals have been ridiculed and their practitioners have suffered much, often with their lives. The latest and worst example of this for some time is in Cambodia. No new age is just around the corner in such places, only an intensification of bitterness and hatred, the causes of future strife.

So for a Buddhist there are only signs of a new age in some parts of society, in some countries in the world. This does not seem much like the rather grandiose language often used to describe the onset of such a new age when apparently all mankind will live in peace and plenty.

The Buddhist, as a realist, is also going to question how this new age will happen. The most common answers seem to be that the solar system has now entered some new astrological division of the cosmos where it is said spiritual vibrations are more easily contacted and developed. This theory seems to depend upon space and time. A flaw here would seem to be the fact that different astrological systems

(Western, Indian, Chinese, Tibetan) often calculate such matters differently so that one ends up with "new ages" at different times. Not encouraging! And one should say also that if a new age depends upon space and time, this seems to admit of a great plan somewhere. Now such a plan is always the work of a creator—and a Buddhist sees no reason at all to assume that there is either a plan or a creator. There is no evidence at all of either. However, this is not the time to pursue this particular topic which can be investigated elsewhere by anyone interested.

So how will a new age happen? There are quite a number of organizations—some of Western religious traditions and others out of the East, while yet others are materialistic in their views—who are sure that the new age is going to arrive in the way imagined by them, and only by them. They propound various infallible theories which will lead to a wonderful world in future, usually well into the future. The danger in these organizations is their intolerance. They all share a narrowness which allows only their own ideas to triumph as the guiding light for a new civilization. And the wonderful thing is that there are more and more of such philosophies, each one of which has the only key to the new age! And people believe in them, which is still more wonderful! They turn their eyes away from all the other new-age

salesmen and like sheep follow only their own leaders. Such is the conflict engendered by views and clinging to views, as the Buddha pointed out two thousand five hundred years ago.

A new age then, seems unlikely to arise in this way, unless by conquest, force or revolution and then how will it be any better than the old age we have with us now?

What do Buddhists say about a new age?

The Buddha's words on the subject should be carefully distinguished from those of the later commentators. It is true that the Buddha mentioned vast cycles of time during which the general dispositions and lifespan of human beings vary greatly. He spoke of times when men are long-lived, have fewer troubles, and sometimes may witness the arising of a Buddha which is the most helpful condition for practising Dhamma (his Teachings). But long life can also be a hindrance for this, since beings then have difficulty in understanding impermanence which is a very basic and important aspect of Dhamma.

When the last Buddha, Gotama or Sakyamuni, was teaching, he spoke of men's lifespan as a hundred

years while occasionally one finds mention of people living to one hundred and twenty. (This must be considered a round number). The Buddha himself experienced final Nibbāna (Nirvana), what people who do not understand would consider as death, at the age of eighty. Moreover, he taught that as defilements of the heart, such as greed, aversion and delusion were increasing, man's lifespan would decrease. So we are now in an era of increasing defilements, which is certainly borne out by recent history, and decreasing average age, which would be true of the whole world. This does not seem an auspicious time to herald a new age!

The commentators who wrote in Sri Lanka about one thousand years after the Buddha's final Nibbāna paint an even darker picture by saying that ability to attain enlightenment gradually fades away in five hundred year stages. By now, according to them, it is only possible with the maximum effort to attain the first insight into the truth of Nibbāna, that is, the Path and Fruit moment called Stream-entry. The time will come in future when even this will be quite impossible due to human beings' obtuseness.

Mahāyāna traditions in Tibet, China and Japan are even more gloomy and depict the present time as "the Dharma-ending Age" when no attainment is possible anymore and all that one can do is to aspire to be

reborn at the time of the future Buddha, Ariya Metteyya (Arya Maitreya), or else get rebirth in one of the pure Buddha-lands.

However, there is also a Buddhist tradition from the Commentaries that the present Buddha's Teachings will last for five thousand years and after half of this period has passed in steady decline, there will be a revival in the second half. It is now Buddhist Era 2521 and that halfway point was just 21 years ago. And it is true that there are many hopeful signs in Buddhist countries, with more interest being taken in meditation and the deeper practice of Dhamma. But at the same time there is the shrinkage of the Buddhist world caused by Communist invasion and revolution as well as the creeping rot of Western materialism in the remaining Buddhist lands. It is a moot point whether any great revival has shown itself in these last few years.

On the other hand, the Commentarial and Mahāyāna picture of five hundred year periods of decline is obviously rather stilted. It introduces into Buddhism the idea that Dhamma-practice is governed by time, as though this were some principle "outside" the worlds which governed even conduct. Such a theory was refuted by the Buddha himself, for in his days there were those who held that time was the supreme principle. A theory of this sort is obviously

fatalistic and can be made the excuse for not making an effort with oneself: “What can I do now? It is the Kali Yuga (etc.)!” So if one hears that the Buddha said his Teaching would last for five thousand years and would decline by set stages, you should know that these are the commentators’ words, not his own. [1] And in Buddhist lands today, such as Thailand and Burma, there are living proofs of how wrong the Commentaries are since enlightened masters are still to be found there.

The Buddha’s Teaching is that practice does not depend on time, it depends on effort, and effort can always be made. It is true that some times and places may be more conducive to effort but if one waited for them to happen, maybe one would not be in the position to take advantage of them, due to obstructive fruits of *kamma* (karma). So effort NOW will produce good results, just as effort in the time of the Buddha produced good results. This is not a thing that depends on time.

This brings us to a final point: what makes for the decline of the Buddha’s Teachings and what makes for their long continuance? In answering this question it should be remembered that as these Teachings consist of virtue, meditation and wisdom, if they flourish then this should indicate truly the coming of a new age, while if these things decline there will be no hope of a

new age, whatever one believes. The venerable Ānanda, the Buddha's personal attendant for many years, was once asked this question. He replied in this way: "If mindfulness is practised then the Teachings last long after the Master's final Nibbāna, but if mindfulness is not practised then the Teaching declines."

Mindfulness or awareness is necessary whatever Dhamma is practised. Even if people are to be generous and keep the Five Precepts they must have mindfulness. And if they are not content to practise just this much, but wish to meditate every day, then mindfulness is essential.

What is mindfulness? In daily life it means mindfulness of one's body and what one does with it, as well as mindfulness of speech. In both cases mindfulness ensures that one harms neither oneself nor other living beings. In fact, mindfulness brings out all wholesome qualities of the mind and leads to their development by way of wisdom-understanding. It is mindfulness too that makes one aware of the kinds of conduct which are sure to bring only more suffering and trouble to oneself and others, and so leads one to stop that activity.

The scope of mindfulness is not limited to body and speech actions but applies also to the mind. One can

become mindful of the arising of greedy, angry and deluded states of mind so that a way out of these unwholesome mental activities can be found. At first there is "me" being mindful of "my mind," but later, with practice, there is just mindfulness and eventually all trace of "me" and "my mind" disappears, deep peace and penetrating insight remaining. And these are the goals of the meditator, tranquillity and insight. Indeed, they are really desired by so many who may never even have heard of meditation but who long for a heart at peace and a lack of inner conflict.

Then what has this to do with the new age? It points out where any new age has to begin. It won't come about because of the stars, or some imagined hierarchy, or a more imaginary creator, but only out of the heart purified of greed, aversion and delusion. The more of these things that we find expressed in the world, the less likely any new age will dawn, unless it is a new age of horrific power struggles. So it is up to every one of us to make the new age arrive. The new age without greed and selfish desire, the new age without anger and hatred, the new age without confusion and deluded states of mind. And this is how to make it happen: practise those Five Precepts (not killing living beings, not taking what is not given, no wrong conduct in sexual relations, not speaking falsely, and not taking intoxicants of any sort as they

confuse the mind); be as mindful as possible in everyday life and pull the mind out of unwholesome mental activities; meditate every day, once or twice, for as long a time as one can manage; listen to the Dhamma whenever there is the chance, ask questions about it and take an intelligent interest in it for it is all about this very life that we are leading now; and then when one has time go and spend a week or so meditating in a quiet place where there is good instruction and help with one's difficulties.

And then—why should the new age not dawn? At any rate it is sure to dawn in one's own heart with the light of wisdom and the radiance of love. And what better place for a new age could there be than that?

Relating Religions

In the past, many people knew only about their own religion which might have been the majority faith in the area where they were living. Only in those parts of the world where two or more of the great religions overlapped was there some possibility of people

knowing beliefs other than their own. Even then, for reasons of narrow dogmatism and ignorance—especially in the West—few would know the religion of others well.

Now things are different. With quick and easy transportation and the translation and printing of many religious scriptures, people are faced with a great variety of choices in religion. We can distinguish various responses to this situation. Some are puzzled and doubtful when they are confronted with what may seem to be a Babel of religious opinions. They are unable to decide what should be believed, like the intelligent people called the Kālāmas in India more than 2500 years ago. It is recorded in the Discourse to the Kālāmas (in the Buddhist scripture called the Pali Canon: Aṅguttara-nikāya III 65) that once when Lord Buddha was travelling through the lands of the Kālāma people, he came to their town of Kesaputta. The Kālāmas knew of his great reputation and went out of the town to meet him. After they had greeted him and sat down, here is what they said: “Lord, certain ascetics and brahmins come to Kesaputta. As to their own doctrine, they illustrate and illuminate it in full, but as to the doctrine of others, they abuse it, revile it, deprecate it and pull it to pieces. Moreover, Lord, yet others ascetics and brahmins on coming to Kesaputta do the same thing. When we listen to them,

Lord, we have doubt and uncertainty as to which of these revered ascetics is speaking truth and which speaks falsehood.” The Buddha’s reply was perfectly to the taste of the sceptical Kālāmas: “Yes, Kālāmas, you may well doubt, you may well be uncertain. In a doubtful matter uncertainty does arise.” The ten criteria which one should not take at the basis of religious belief, which follow in the Buddha’s reply, would take us too far away from the present subject though they should be read and contemplated by everyone having a faith. [2] The Kālāma’s scepticism was intelligent and though it did not give them any certain way to practise, it did protect them from the dogmatists. The attitude of the Kālāmas is quite common today, for as in their time there are now so many teachings available.

Quite another attitude is represented by the “ascetics and brahmins” mentioned above. We have all met with religious teachers who “illustrate and illuminate their own doctrine in full, but the doctrine of others, they abuse it, revile it, deprecate it and pull it to pieces.” Perhaps such a destructive and hate-rooted method of dealing with others’ religions was more popular in the West in past centuries than in the present. But there are still many examples to be found today in Western countries, some among traditional and extreme churches and some among those of

extreme political persuasions. In the days of the Buddha, the brahmins saw themselves as the guardians of religious orthodoxy and it is recorded many times in Buddhist scriptures that they made statements like "Only this is truth: all else falsehood" about dogma which they accepted and wished others to accept (such as the superiority of the brahmin caste and the efficacy of great animal sacrifices). So the second way of looking at religions is to defend one's own beliefs fiercely and reject others' faiths without examination. This is likely to be the approach of people who have the "faith-character" strongest in them and are weak in the "wisdom-character." Blind faith like this is dangerous as it teams up easily with strong aversion, leading to intolerance, even to persecution and so-called religious killings.

If this were the only approach possible between different religions then unending conflict between those which are dogmatic and based only upon beliefs must continue. But there are other approaches, and next we can consider one which is the opposite extreme of the exclusive approach above. We could call it the "inclusive" approach, the aim of which is to make all religions one. Here we can distinguish two popular methods. The first is tried by the man who has no particular religious scheme in mind but just wishes to fit all religions together. So he takes such

concepts as appeal to him and seem to be similar, and then relates them together, telling himself and others: "This equals that." He does this either on the basis of rational thought with knowledge gained by study, or on the basis of a mystical experience which he may not have completely understood, or wrongly evaluated. The mixture concocted by him will be viewed with some doubts by those who have studied better or meditated deeper than he has. Such a mixture must be subjective and unstable, depending to a great degree on a person's character at the time of its concoction. This approach is known as *kitcheree-dharma* in India, *kitcheree* being a kind of Bengali stew with many ingredients. Although it seems to bring harmony between various religions, really it does so only by blurring differences and ignoring what is dissimilar, just as in *kitcheree* the various chopped up vegetables stewed in a thick soup come to look like each other but examination with the tongue will tell the taster, "Ah, this is potato; this is ..." and so on. *Kitcheree-dharma* is popular just now, even with ecumenical Christians, but really it should be called obscurantism and to make it work one must ignore some facts. (And 'to ignore' implies ignorance, not Enlightenment).

The second method here is pursued by people who do have a religious scheme in which others' faiths are accommodated. It is a case of the bed of Procrustes.

Procrustes was the name of a fabulous robber who fitted victims to his bed by stretching them or by mutilation. ("procrustean" is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as "tending to produce uniformity by violent methods (from Greek, lit. 'stretcher')." Their methods, of course, do not involve physical violence but violence is certainly done by them to the tenets of others' religions in order that they fit into the scheme. A mild example of this has been the brahminical scheme of avatars (descents or incarnations of God) into which the Buddha was degraded as ninth avatar of Vishnu in late mediaeval India. More recent attempts at this sort of thing may come to the minds of readers. It is usually done for the glorification of one's own teacher who in this scheme is pictured as the pinnacle towards which all other teachers lead. At this rate, only one's own teacher is worth listening to as he has proclaimed the highest and final revelation, all other teachers being only his precursors. Obviously, the procrustean method must be used a great deal to make such a system workable.

Will it bring peace and harmony? Believers in these various schemes may think that it will. But what about those believers who have their own religions "stretched or mutilated" by such schemes? Are they not likely to feel hurt? It was not done with their consent, and very likely it is not in accordance with

what their teachers have said. So have they not reason to feel hurt? This is where such violent methods cannot possibly produce harmony. But such schemers will even say in effect to the believers, "Oh, you do not understand your own teacher. We understand him though!" But is this likely to be so? If one wants to track this approach down to psychological motivations, a need for security is one part while the unwholesome mental factor of conceit is another.

People who employ a view such as "all-religions-are-one" are not "faith-characters." In Buddhist psychology they would be called "discursive-thought-characters" who tend to construct views, and unfortunately, views like this are a hindrance to developing true insight-wisdom and prevent the attainment of the viewless enlightenment. However, the results of this approach are much milder than the first. Whereas that has given rise to bloodshed and war in order to defend authority and orthodoxy (whatever these happen to be), this latter approach produces what one might call "octopus religion"—the various attempts at all-embracing systems. The idea is not to kill off your opponents but simply to absorb them. Though this is more peaceful, who wants to be digested by another body.

May I suggest that these two extremes are both unsatisfactory as ways of relating religions together.

But there is a third and very practical alternative, which is at the same time truly non-violent. Throughout history, this has been the Buddhist way of living harmoniously with men of all faiths, but one does not have to be a Buddhist to apply it to oneself, just a man of goodwill. It is simply this: "This person is a Christian, that one a Hindu, this one a Muslim, that one a Buddhist—towards all of them develop and radiate *metta* (loving-kindness). Be glad that they have something good for their lives. Treat them and their beliefs gently—do not hurt them or try to change them in any way. Let Christians be good Christians and full of the spirit of charity. Let Muslims be good Muslims and live at peace with others. Let Hindus be good Hindus and practise their religion with *ahimsa* (non-violence), and Buddhists be good Buddhists rejoicing in the religious riches of their neighbours. *Metta* or loving-kindness is the kind of love which is not limited by one's own desires, even those subtle wishes to make other people conform to one's own beliefs. It cannot grow in the heart which has such biases. But it can overcome aversions and hatreds so that all beings, human or otherwise, become one's friends. With all human beings as one's friends one neither wishes to suppress them nor to absorb them. May they all be happy!"

Is this not the best way to relate together all the

diverse people of this world, and so, their diverse religions?

The Buddha has said in the Dhammapada:

“Not by enmity at any time are those with enmity here stilled: by non-enmity are they stilled—this is an everlasting Law.”

Notes

1. Some may remember that a prediction in the Suttas is attributed to the Buddha himself: namely, that true Dhamma would last only five hundred years consequent upon the ordination of Bhikkhunīs (nuns), rather than a thousand (AN 8:51). This is the only place where the Buddha speaks in such terms. Could it be an interpolation? Or should one understand these large numbers in a general sense, similarly as “five hundred bhikkhus” just means a large company of monks? Probably this interpretation, as a long period of time, may be correct; for the Buddha, knowing human beings very well, foresaw trouble and what would follow from it—the shortened lifespan of his Dhamma. [\[Back\]](#)
2. See *A Criterion of True Religion*, Mahamakut Press, Bangkok, and *The Kalama Sutta*, [Wheel No. 8](#), BPS, Kandy. [\[Back\]](#)

Table of Contents

Title page	2
A “New Age?” A Buddhist View	4
What do Buddhists say about a new age?	9
Relating Religions	15
Notes	24