

The One Earth

His Holiness the Dalai Lama with Franz Alt, *Our Only Home: A Climate Appeal to the World*, London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2020, pp 144.

I was moved by an interview with the Dalai Lama on Britain's Channel 4 News the same day this book was published. I have never actually met the Dalai Lama but, as for many of us, it's like we have, so engaging and well-known is he across the whole globe. People flock to his teaching events. Now he is 85 and has more or less retired to his residence in Dharamsala in North East India. He looked physically older and frailer and I suddenly realised he is mortal after all, so accustomed are we to thinking of him as a permanent world teacher, a sort of planetary father figure.

He would, of course, never deny that in mind and body he is only too mortal, like the rest of us, but the spirit of his teaching is timeless, as this short book testifies. *Our Only Home* has a mantraic quality about it. It has the same simple but powerful message the Dalai Lama has been giving throughout his life - universal responsibility, peace, and compassion for each other, for the environment and for all its sentient beings.

In a teaching event in London in 1984 the Dalai Lama spoke in detail about the Dzogchen tradition, the Great Perfection wisdom that is at the centre of Tibetan Buddhism. He referred to *Hitting the Essence in Three Words*, a text from the nineteenth century Tibetan master, Patrul Rinpoche. The three words are "view, meditation and action". Action is very important but, with the other two, it can be so much more effective .¹ His Climate Appeal may be a call to action but throughout *Our Only Home* the "view" is very clear and the characteristic lucidity of the words are the result of a lifetime's meditation.

The view the fourteenth Dalai Lama advocates is - like that of Pope Francis' impressive 2015 encyclical on the environment, *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si'*² - one of integral ecology and humanity's interdependence with nature. He urges us to meditate on this and then act. He particularly emphasises the part the young now play. They are awake to the kind of ruined planet they will encounter in the future and are not shy of calling out how asleep our governing classes are - politically, psychologically and ecologically - to the reality we can see all around us now.

Our Only Home is actually written by Franz Alt, a German journalist specialising in environmental and peace-policy issues, and based on transcribed interviews with the Dalai Lama. Actually, Alt has been interviewing him for decades about environmental issues. The first two chapters consist of an introduction to the climate emergency (our “Third World War against nature”), to the principle of life as sacred and to the Dalai Lama as someone who embodies that principle, and who, at the same time, is “the world’s most likeable person....the happiest person worldwide”. In fact, *The Art of Happiness*, also co-written, this time by the psychiatrist, Howard C. Cutler, and published in 1998 was one of his defining, popular books. ³ “Happiness” may not be something the modern world believes in, but the Tibetans think of it as a skill that can be learnt, despite, and emerging from, all the suffering we also inflict on ourselves. For them, it is an ability to live in harmony with whatever life throws at us, including, yes, the challenge of the climate emergency.

The Dalai Lama, as “a simple Buddhist monk”, is no political or religious ideologue. For instance, he declares: “Ethics is more important than religion. We are not born a member of a particular religion. But ethics is innate in all of us”. Hence his conviction that “secular ethics (is) beyond all religions”, that human dignity is the highest individual value and public welfare the highest collective value. Hence, also, his solidarity with Pope Francis and the ecological awareness in the latter’s 2015 encyclical.

Alt believes that, despite all the damage we are doing to life on Earth and to ourselves, “We dare for a future”. This is crucial at this time in view of the IPCC’s recent shock reports about what little time we have left, indicated, for instance, by the title of Jonathon Porritt’s recent book, published this year, *Hope in Hell: a decade to confront the climate emergency*.

The substance of *Our Only Home* is Alt’s interview and dialogue with the Dalai Lama. The themes are familiar: happiness - “The purpose of life is to be happy”; the oneness of humanity; the importance of practising compassion; the physical, mental and emotional equality - the *buddha nature* - of all we seven billion people; the possibility that we can change - “the change must start with us as individuals.....our basic nature is compassionate”; and the “universal responsibility” he called upon us to assume when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1989.

Creativity and non-violence are qualities the Dalai Lama also sees as natural human potentials. What distinguishes human beings from animals is “our specific capacity for long-term thinking. Animals live from one day to the next, whereas our brains can think ten or even a hundred years ahead”. This capacity can make us both creative and destructive. Hence the need for non-violence - “We have learned that even enemies can become friends. I am a strong believer in non-violence”.

The Dalai Lama views Tibet as the epicentre of climate change. A Chinese ecologist has described the Tibetan Plateau as the Third Pole because it is the third largest area of frozen water on the planet and 1.5 billion people - one fifth of the world’s population - depend on it as a “water tank”. As the Dalai Lama reminds us, all the major rivers of Asia originate there - “the Ganges, Karnali, Brahmaputra, Indus, Sutlej, Irrawaddy, Salween, Yellow River, Yangtze and Mekong”. Yet the temperatures on the Tibetan Plateau have increased by more than double the global average and its glaciers are melting at a rate that has almost doubled since 2005. More than 500 glaciers have disappeared altogether. The Dalai Lama warns: “If Tibet’s 46,000 glaciers continue to melt, we will face unimaginable water problems and water will become a key cause for conflict in the future.”

For the Dalai Lama material values do matter, but deeper inner values are more important. His friend, Mikhail Gorbachev, who co-founded the international organisation, Green Cross, and is committed to environmental issues, believes we need a new balance between economy and ecology - “ecology must become the smarter economy”. At the same time scientists are beginning to take an interest in the environment and are paying attention to training the mind.

Chapter 5 is entitled “The Solar Age Begins - The Sun Wins”. The Dalai Lama believes renewables are the future. For instance, today, Germany produces as much as 50% green electricity, whereas in 2000 it was only 5%. Renewables are part of the gift economy - “the Sun and wind do not send an invoice”. This is the beginning of a “world-wide solar revolution”.

He is admiring of young climate activists, particularly Greta Thunberg - “The youth of the 21st century are the planet’s real humanity now Even as global warming increases in intensity, they can work together in the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood to share

and find solutions. They are our real hope.” While our political leaders seem unable to address the challenge, the young can work from “the bottom up” to bring about change and because their best efforts are based in truth and reason.

Chapter 6 has an intriguing title - “The Mountains Here are as Bald as a Monk’s Head”. The Dalai Lama is referring to deforestation in Tibet, a matter of great sadness to him and his people. The Chinese have cut down 85% of all their trees, an act which has huge environmental consequences for Tibet and the world. The tree is a potent symbol and reality in Tibet - Shakyamuni Buddha was born and gained enlightenment under a tree. At the same time the Dalai Lama has made environmental conservation one of his life’s commitments and advocates protection everywhere he goes. The healing power of forests is increasingly recognised - “nature does not need humans but humans do need nature”.

Our Only Home includes the full text of a poem the Dalai Lama wrote to mark the opening of the International Conference on Ecological Responsibility on 2 October, 1993 at New Delhi: “The Sheltering Tree of Interdependence”. In the poem he stressed that “The interdependent nature/ Of the external environment/ And people’s inward nature.....Has been verily vindicated/ By our present experience”.

Chapter 8 is Franz Alt’s epilogue, “For a Solar Age”, in which, if we are to prevent the worst effects of climate change, he advocates we need a second Enlightenment, more profound than the Western modern one, “an ‘enlightening’ of the Enlightenment”. Some of the points he makes, as we are in the crucial third decade of this century, echo what the Dalai Lama has been teaching all his life.

In 2006 the transcriptions of a teaching he gave at the turn of the century to an audience of 10,000 at Lerab Ling in Southern France were published. ⁴ In these teachings he expounded, firstly, “The Key Principles of the Buddhadharma” and, secondly, how to find “Comfort and Ease in Meditation on The Great Perfection”. From these understandings, based in the thought and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, a vision emerges which has enabled the Dalai Lama to embrace the whole theatre of human affairs in his lifetime, including not just the common ground between different religions but the importance of peace and reconciliation, the protection of the environment, human rights and responsibilities, economic equality and the essential value of education and science.

The Lerab Ling teachings encapsulate the core of the Buddhist wisdom that now emanates from the Tibetan Diaspora, spread across the globe. *Our Only Home*, published in 2020, is the simple pith of his perennial message to the world in a mere 140 pages. It is a book everyone should read at the beginning of a decade in which our future may well be decided.

December 2020

Notes

¹ A transcription of these teachings was published as: His Holiness The Dalai Lama, (2000) *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, translated by Geshe Thupten Jinpa and Robert Barron, edited by Patrick Gaffney, Ithaca: Snow Lion

² See *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si': The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment*, with commentary by Sean McDonagh, (2016), New York: Orbis books.

³ See His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with Howard C. Cutler, (1998), *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, London: Hodder and Stoughton. Also the follow-up by the two of them, (2009), *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, when the Dalai Lama acknowledges that happiness is both an inner quality and a societal problem.

⁴ The Dalai Lama (2006), *The Vision of Enlightenment*, Foreword by Sogyal Rinpoche, translated by Matthieu Ricard, Richard Barron and Adam Pearcey, edited by Patrick Gaffney, London: Dharmakosha.