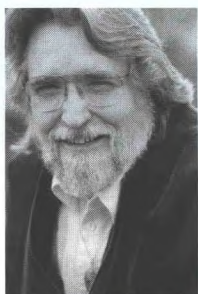


NEALE DONALD WALSCH

Finding Larger Truths for Peace

A conversation with spiritual messenger and author of "Conversations With God"

Spiritual messenger Neale Donald Walsch, author of the best-selling "Conversations with God" series, took the world by storm with his message of personal responsibility, individual spiritual relationships with "God," and a universal humanity. The first book, published in 1992, was on The New York Times best-seller list for 130 weeks (more than 2 years), and has sold millions of copies worldwide. His 15 books have been translated in 27 languages. His most recent book, "The New Revelations" (Atria Books 2002), speaks of changing our beliefs to achieve peace. Walsch answered these questions of Mandala managing editor Helen Chang and assistant editor Jaffa Elias:



"Religions need merely to expand their understandings and teachings to include larger truths that would render the religions themselves non-harmful to human beings."

M: Buddhists do not believe in "God." We do not believe in a large, over arching deity that watches over everyone, or an external force, such as "God." Instead, we speak of having a "Buddha nature," which means that with proper practice, we can realize the enlightened state of Buddha. Yet your conversations are with a "God" being, who claims to have a universally true spiritual reality. How is your conversation relevant to Buddhists?

NDW: I believe that "Buddha nature" and what I would call "God nature" are the same thing. I believe that Buddha continues to inspire human beings to this present day, and I believe that God does also. I believe that Buddha nature and God are different words for the same thing. I believe that Buddha was self-realized – that is, he knew who he really was. He saw into the true nature of things. And he saw and taught of a path by which all human beings might have the same experience.

I believe that God is who Buddha really was. I believe that this is who we ALL are – though few realize it. I believe that when one realizes that one is God (that is, united with God, combined with God, a part of God, inseparable from God), then one has achieved Buddha Nature. I believe that Buddhists are wise, however, not to use the term "God" because they see – quite correctly – that the term "God" had been co-opted and corrupted by many punitive, exclusivist organized religions. Any attempt to define God is limiting, and God is the great unlimited. Since God is unlimited, God must be no thing in particular – for if God was a single particular thing, then God

would by that definition be limited. Put another way, God is the great no thing. Or, if you wish, nothing. This is very similar to the essence of Buddha's teaching.

M: His Holiness the Dalai Lama does not attempt to convert people to Buddhism, and in fact encourages people to stay within their own religion. The Lord Buddha himself encouraged people to be skeptical, and accept his teachings only if they rang true to the individual's experience. And Buddhism does not proselytize or use violence to spread its teachings. How do you reconcile this with your beliefs?

NDW: My books also encourage people to stay within their own religion. A careful reading of them will bring anyone to this conclusion "The New Revelations" makes the statement repeatedly that the answer is not to reject or abandon one's religious beliefs, but to expand them to include larger understandings that might make the religions themselves more viable, practical, workable, and true to our earthly experience.

In this, my writings agree completely by those of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. And, like Buddha, I invite – indeed, I challenge – all of my readers not to accept my writings or my truths as their own, but to challenge them at every level. Indeed, my latest book repeatedly counsels against making "The New Revelations" the latest "belief system." It says that the New Revelations should be explored deeply to see if they are in accordance with one's own deepest inner truth and knowing. And so Buddha and I also agree emphatically.

M: You are against organized religions, which teach exclusivity. Does this mean that you are against all religions, or simply religions that teach exclusivity?

NDW: I am not "against" anything. To be "against" something merely places it there. Resistance is a very high form of creation. I am noticing what exclusivist religions are doing in our world, and my books ask the question, "Is this what we, as humans, wish to continue to choose? Does this serve humanity?" I believe that the answer is no, particularly to the second question. If the answer of the majority is no, my books offer another suggestion.



M: Do you believe that religions should be eliminated altogether?

NDW: "The New Revelations" does not call for religions to be "eliminated" but rather, the book makes it very, very clear that religions need merely to expand their understandings and teachings to include larger truths that would render the religions themselves non-harmful to human beings.

M: Are you creating a new religion?

NDW: No. I do intend, however, on playing a role in the creation of a new worldwide spiritual movement. Or, to be, perhaps, more accurate, I would say that I intend to galvanize and focus the spiritual movement that has already been created on the planet – a movement among people everywhere to activate their deepest impulse to find and express divinity in a way which hurts no one, harms no one, makes no one else "wrong," and makes no one feel that they are somehow "better."

M: You speak of the importance of understanding cause and effect - that one's actions always have a result. In Buddhism, we call this karma. We believe that by understanding the cause and effect of our actions, we can choose to abandon harmful actions. Then we can cultivate virtue instead, in order to achieve the ultimate goal - enlightenment - for ourselves and for others. For you, why is it important to understand "karma?"

NDW: For exactly the same reason.

M: His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of the importance of universal responsibility. You do, too. What does it mean to you? Why is it important?

NDW: Unless each of us is willing to be responsible for all of it – that is, for all of humanity's experience – we cannot hope to change our collective experience in any meaningful way. I cannot be content to be responsible merely for the experience that I am having, but must also be willing to be responsible for the experience that you are having – for the chief and principle reason that there is no separation between you and me. You and I are one, and unless I begin to act like that, I will do nothing but continue to go around harming myself (that is, harming the human race) by my individual actions.

M: You speak of "Five steps to peace." What are they? How are they relevant to Buddhists?

NDW: Peace will be attained when we, as human beings....P–ermit ourselves to acknowledge that some of our old beliefs about "God" and about life are no longer working. E–xplore the possibility that there is something we do not understand about "God" and about life, the understanding of which could change everything. A–nnounce that we are willing for new understandings of "God" and life to now be brought forth, understandings

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that could produce a new way of life. C—ourageously examine these new understandings, and if they align with our personal inner truth and knowing, to enlarge our belief system to include them. E—xpress our lives as a demonstration of our highest beliefs, rather than as a denial of them. The relevancy to Buddhists of these." Five Steps to Peace is self-apparent.

M: Many of us feel helpless in the face of possible war. Even if we believe in peace, or practice peace, we cannot change people who are beating war drums. How do we keep our courage?

NDW: Through non-attachment. By releasing ourselves from expectations and becoming unattached to results or outcomes. By knowing and understanding that the world is spinning perfectly in every single moment, and that our job is to see the perfection. By working towards a world of harmony and non-violence in our hearts and in the outer world that we ourselves touch, and by expanding the reach and the impact of our touch, if we choose, in order to touch all the world

M: You call yourself a "social activist for spiritual change." How do you do this in everyday life, like when you're going to "work," or talking with your children, or driving, or taking out the trash?

NDW: By making spiritual change produce change in the way that I do all those things that you mentioned. First, I do not go to "work." I go only to "joy." If a thing is work, I do not do it. I would rather let it go "undone" until I can see it as "joy." Buddha Nature sees joy in everything — even in pain. This, of course, makes the pain bearable. It can even transform the pain. It can actually make the experience of pain disappear.

M: Have you achieved nirvana (a permanent state of peace)?

NDW: No. But I have achieved bliss. I believe that bliss is a "temporary state of peace," as opposed to a "permanent" state of peace. I have achieved and experienced bliss many times in my life, and I achieve it more and more, and for longer and longer periods, everyday. I experience bliss through non-attachment. Through non-judgment. Through non-differentiation, through non-separation. I would call this the state of Godliness. It is what God is. Non-attached, non-judgmental, non-differentiated, non-separated. Buddhists would call this the Buddha Nature. I see no difference at all. I see, in fact, non-difference everywhere.

Turning Rage to Love

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for us.

Over and over, Buddha taught the value of perspective. He reminded his followers that energy needs to go into our spiritual awakening, our practice. If we don't know how much time we have left to fall into our own enlightenment — and we don't — how dare we spend hours, months or even years frivolously? Losing any of our precious life to relationship rage is a complete waste of time. As they began to understand impermanence and know the high costs of rage, Buddha's female disciples put the bulk of their energies into their own spiritual growth, their own enlightenment.

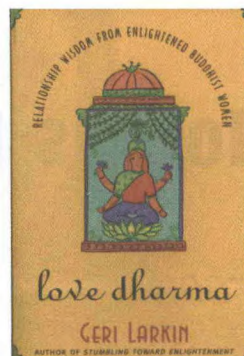
What wisdom. Here's a bonus: When you and I have the courage to put our own enlightenment first, all relationships are joy. Why? Because in good times and bad they are feeding us clues about the work we need to do. Here's where we might be stuck, where we blame our partner for all the wrongs of our lives. Here's where we are surprisingly and wonderfully kind and compassionate and forgiving, and where we know how to giggle and dance and learn a new theme song.

FORGIVENESS

Keeping a list of all the ways we've been wronged or hurt by our partner just makes us sick physically and emotionally. In 1999, the Templeton Foundation for Forgiveness Research in Richmond, Virginia, spent about \$6 million to study how forgiving someone and moving on with our lives affects us. What happens if we simply let go of our rage? Some of their findings are amazing. In one study more than 70 undergraduates at Hope College in Hope, Michigan, were instructed to cultivate vengeful thoughts for as little as sixteen seconds. The group experienced increased blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension. On the other hand, when they focused on forgiving, on just letting go, the stress indicators fell significantly.

WOMEN FRIENDS

What if you are just plain stuck in rage? If it has locked you into its seductive dance



of righteous energy? What then? Once skillful response is to seek refuge in the wisdom of other women. Ancient /Buddhist women used each other as protection against relationship rage. They used each other's patience, wisdom, and presence. When some of the women became known as Buddhist teachers, the other women were able to lean

hard on them for help. Women ministering to women.

Every woman I have ever known has analyzed and fretted over her relationships. This fretting and analyzing includes all the women ministers I know. Plus, we all have been in love at least once. So we understand, in our bones, what it feels like to be in love — sick love, healthy love, in-between love. We know what it is to lie awake wondering if he or she will call. Most women ministers I know have to live through falling out of love or being abandoned. When you talk to us and we nod, it is out of shared experience.

GRATITUDE

Finally, as crazy as this sounds, practicing gratitude can cut through relationship rage. I'm pretty skilled at getting angry. It happens fast, and it's hot. Almost always the anger comes from situations where someone has acted cruelly to another person. After thousands and thousands of hours of meditation and years of spiritual practice, I have finally figured out how to transform the rage. Beyond the witnessing of it, finding something to be grateful for — anything — cuts the rage. Gratitude that I'm alive, that spring always comes, that my behind hasn't sunk all the way to my knees, that my kids still love me. Gratitude keeps my emotions soft and opens a space to choose compassion. In that space, the wisdom that a specific situation needs can also surface.

Geri Larkin is the founder and guiding teacher of Still Point Zen Buddhist Temple in Detroit, Michigan. Her previous books include, "Stumbling Towards Enlightenment," and "First You Shave Your Head." This essay is adapted from, "Love Dharma: Relationship Wisdom from Enlightened Buddhist Women." ©2002 by Geri Larkin. Reprinted with the permission of Tuttle Publishing, www.tuttlepublishing.com.