

How to end the world—really

Historically, there are two kinds of religion: those that try to terrify others and those that try to comfort others.¹ By “religion” here I mean any kind of belief that we regard as affecting us and our world. Those who use fear are usually from God-based religions that demand the total faith and loyalty of their followers. One of the most effective ways of asserting control over others or drawing them back into the fold is to claim that the world is ending.²

As early as around 2800 BCE, an Assyrian clay tablet warned that the world, on account of degeneracy, was going to end. In the year 1000, thousands of Christians across Europe awaited expectantly and hundreds of pilgrims went to Mount Zion to await the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In 1524, a German astronomer and preacher, named Johannes Stoeffler predicted that a great flood would end the world, and people built rafts and arks on the Rhine. When the waters did not rise, they deservedly threw him into a pond!

Modern doom-sayers have a more insidious effect with the help of the mass media, TV and the Internet. There were at least four doom predictions this year (2011), none of which happened. US evangelical preacher, Harold Camping, for example, revised his 21 May judgement day to 21 October. Before that, Camping said he was not giving away his possessions: “I shall have to live in a house, I still have to drive a car. What would be the value of that? If it is Judgement Day, why would I give it away?”³

Informed Buddhists, however, remain unconcerned over such planned panic predictions. The reason is simple: the world would only end *after* the next Buddha, Maitreya, comes, which would be at least some millennia from now. Even then, world destruction will occur many millennia after that, from natural causes. Then, in due course, the world would re-evolve, and the cycle is endless.

What do we mean by “world”? There are three senses of the word: (1) the physical world, (2) the world as living beings, and (3) the world of formations. When other religions and people speak of “the end of the world,” they, as a rule, refer only to the first, that is, the physical world. When the physical world is destroyed, they think, all life, including human life, is destroyed, too.

In Buddhist cosmology, however, the universe itself is of three kinds or dimensions, that is, the physical world of the senses (which we inhabit), the “form” world whose beings, simply put,

¹ For a list of such religions and religious leaders, see eg Peter B Clark (ed), *Encyclopedia of New Religions*, Abingdon & NY: Routledge, 2006.

² For examples, see <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Ten-Notable-Apocalypses-That-Obviously-Didnt-Happen.html>

³ See Straits Times (Singapore) 29 May 2010, “Think” p38 (Quotes of the week).

comprise of pure light, and thirdly, the “formless” world of beings of pure energy. Only the first, the physical world of the senses, is destroyed in space-time.

When our universe is destroyed, that is, when the physical world disintegrates, some of the beings are reborn into the form world or the formless world (both of which are unaffected by the cataclysm), or they are reborn into a parallel universe.⁴ In due course, the physical universe will re-evolve, and life will start all over again. This is Buddhist eschatology and cosmology.

Buddhist practitioners, however, are more concerned with the third definition of “world,” that is, the world of formations. Essentially, this is our sense-experiences, through which we create our own “world,” that is, a karma-based world that in turn feeds our rebirth and suffering. In other words, this is karma and rebirth, or, if you like, the world of existential suffering. *This* is the world that needs to be ended, and the end of which leads to spiritual liberation or nirvana.

In this connection, **the Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26) records the Buddha as saying, “In this very fathom-long body, endowed with perception and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ending of the world, and the way leading to the ending of the world.”⁵ This is, of course, a clear reference to the four noble truths, that is, suffering (the unsatisfactoriness of our body-mind world), its arising, its ending, and the way to its ending.

The best way to do this is through the cultivation of a calm and clear mind (that is, meditation), which allows us to understand the true nature of suffering, seeing how it arises and ends. In meditation, when we attain full concentration, the mind temporarily transcends the body: we become mental beings. This, however, is only a momentary ending of the physical world.

As we progress deeper into our mental cultivation, our insight wisdom into suffering and the world becomes more profound and lasting. When we are able to truly free ourselves from all views, then we are really free from suffering, as we have ended the world of formations. The world has truly ended, and nirvana has arisen for us.

In other words, only through our insight wisdom can we really end the world. Otherwise, we can only make false predictions, generation after generation, bringing all kinds of unnecessary sufferings and problems to those who believe us. Anyway, if we keep on declaring that the world will end, we would surely be right one day, if that is all we care about.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁴ On parallel universes, see **Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29/5:59-65) = SD 16.15. See **Aggañña Sutta** (D 27.10/3:84 f) = SD 2.19 esp note on “mostly” at D 27.10a.

⁵ S 2.26/1:61 f = A 4.45/2:47-49 = SD 7.2.