

# 2006-07-17 Politics

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## SPEAKERS

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So I'm going to talk about a topic, which is maybe a little bit unusual for me, for a Buddhist teacher, and I thought I would talk about politics. And maybe they came here to get away from that. And but I think that for some people, what's happening in the world is very much on their minds. Whether it's saying please store this country, all kinds of places. And when I go around sometimes talk informally with people. It seems to turn towards politics quite a bit lately and if it's more than usual, at least in my circles seems to be and so one of the things that I'm sometimes asked is, what is Buddhism it's saved by politics. And sometimes one answer that's given is nothing is that Buddhism should not get involved in the political sphere at all. And another answer is that is everything that you cannot separate out. You cannot separate out daily life, community life, civic life, political life, from a person's spiritual life and practice life that they're all inseparable whole. And so a Buddhist practice like that somehow also address political life. So, if you go back to Buddhism, as a resource for political theory of political thought, what is it that Buddhist wisdom or Buddhist insight has to say about politics What's if you have an insight based approach to politics, what do you get? And some of what I'm going to say applies to any kind of interpersonal relationship where there is conflict intention, or where something has to be solved or figured out, isn't necessarily at the level of government. But how do you how do things? How does power work? One of the things that the Buddha emphasized over and over again, is that is non violence and aggression, no one else nobody. And that when there is victory, when someone is victorious, then someone else is unhappy, someone else's defeated, and that unhappiness is a distress for the person who's lost pointed out that one of the big problems of pure democracy is a tyranny of the majority. And so in fact, America does not have a pure democracy. It has a structure, which was originally set in place to have a check and balance system, so that the abuses of a single ruler could be checked the checks and balances and the abuses of democracy can be checked and balanced for that. So the built in is the idea that there can be problems if you just vote, and one person wins and one person loses. So how do you take care of the rights of the minority? So in Buddhism, there's an interest in finding some approach to moving forward in the Civic level or interpersonal level. That's not opposition. So is there some way of engaging in political life that doesn't

set one person against the other one party against the other and I hear in my circles a lot now about Trying to somehow come up with a liberal religious voice in this country in order to counter the religious right, they've had their say, in the public arena. And liberal religious worlds haven't had much to say in the last decade or two. And so they should kind of rally and be a counter force to the religious right. Or the democrats have to figure out some way to regain the upper hand. And, and that kind of language approaches as oppositional. One person one party wins, the other party loses ones on top or not. And the idea of insight or wisdom, Buddhist based approach to political life, is to try very hard to avoid situations where your opposition or solutions where one person is defeated. So how can we how can we engage in a civic life then That doesn't involve someone being defeated. So there are seven principles or qualities of a wisdom or insight based approach to politics. And the approaches to that to kind of go forward is trying to move civic life forward in healthy ways. That's trying to avoid oppositional quality that often comes into play. And these seven are what we could call here this call today translate today is presence, investigation, effort, happiness, peace, focus, concentration, and equanimity. And so the first one presence, that insight based politics requires presence. You present. And, you know, there's a saying the saying in America, no taxation without representation. Well, Buddhists maybe would say, no representation without presence of being present. And I say that because it's often the case that people make decisions for others, far removed from them. And there can be oppositional qualities that gets set up in place without actually knowing the opposition, knowing who they are. And I see that taking place in my own life in myself that I could your emails are so dangerous, right? You say send me an email is completely misunderstood. Because they aspect, the emotional quality, what you're saying it doesn't come through email. So you thought you were being very warm and loving and they thought you were being tourists. You know, they just couldn't feel the way you felt because not hearing the words. And so, one of the things I've learned is that if I'm feeling some kind of tension with someone It's very important for me to get into their presence. Phone call is maybe sometimes the best I can do, but actually kind of get together with it and meet with them. Because inevitably, I find that the tensions I feel with someone and sometimes the maybe little resentments or annoyances I have about them and what they're doing with their thinking has a lot to do with my imagination, not about who they really are. And if I could actually meet them, then it breaks through the imagination. And also I get to see a more fuller spectrum dimension of who that person is. And I find that inevitably, my sense of I'm in conflict, this person dissolves pretty quickly if I'm actually talking and meeting the person. That's been my experience lately. So I look for opportunities to meet the people that I'm in tension with or some difficulty with recently and so presence and so do we know that people were making decisions for one of the reasons I like having the abortion protesters here Thursdays and Friday mornings and if you've been here some of you have been here seen it. It's there's a huge protest that goes on here on our corner Thursday and Friday mornings, because across three is planned parenthood and without taking aside necessarily for against abortion, I think it's valuable to be present for this Faultline American society is a huge offline around abortion. And until I came here to is this corner, he's moved here four years ago, the abortion debate was something that was you know, I had opinions about and but mostly it was far away. You know, it was something somewhere else. It's quite something to have it on our sidewalk, you know, and you actually witness and you hang out there on the sidewalk little bit and you actually see the tension. The fellow who has

a main project tester out there, protesting the abortions. Some a year and a half ago, someone tried to run them over right here. The person tried to run them over got arrested, you know, it's a pretty good, pretty good, it's pretty tense out there. Some people feel that shouldn't be there, that we should do something but getting them to go away. And maybe, maybe he I don't know. But I value the fact that we're present for that tension. In my mind, it's something I'm aware of. It's very different than when, you know when I read about in the paper Far, far from here. So to find some way to be present for the decisions we have to make or politicians who are insight approach to politics will actually go and be present in the places that are going to be affected by their decisions, meet the people who can be selected to see the environment, see what's going on. And without that kind of sense of presence, there isn't really an understanding perhaps of what needs to be done. There's a lot of misunderstanding can happen. The second approach of insight based politics is investigation. And, and this was really to understand deeply try to investigate and uncover what's really going on here. And I was a big influence in my life was the fact that when I went to college, my last two years of college, I dropped out of college and went back and I went back. I went back to study agriculture. I have a degree in agriculture and regarding my degrees in the art and science of field crop management whenever I'm doing Redwood City and I was quite passionate about if I loved farming was really going to go into that line of work. And I was also a born again, organic farmer and I we have been rained a little bit in organic farming and studied a lot and was quite idealistic, and, and, and had very strong opinions about organic farming. And actually, when I went to UC Davis to get my degree, I was one of the kind of alternatives and agriculture activists on campus there. We actually did a lot in those two years. But one of the things that was quite humbling for me was to begin taking classes in science, the science of farming, in particular science of soil. And to realize that some of my ideas about organic farming, there was no science behind them. In fact, the science behind them were the opposite. And some of the kind of popular, idealistic ideas about farming were just that they were kind of unfounded idealism that maybe was generalizing about particular areas. It was kind of vascular And this generalization that then it was applying some principle to everything. And realizing that it wasn't always like true, was quite humbling for me and quite a kind of wake up call for me. And when I got involved in religion in Buddhism, I had the suspicion that religious people have a greater tendency to generalize than organic farmers. So it became very important for me also to kind of be very careful as I engaged in the spiritual life and thought, to be very careful and considerate about my investigation, my understanding, so it's not to generalize too easily or too quickly. I'm not this is what the truth is. So to investigate and study what's really here, and sometimes I'm embarrassed to read some of the newspapers that I read, because of what statements are made on the front page, that are generalizations that are opinions. Sometimes some To my hidden sometimes not so hidden. And sometimes I read the Chronicle and, and read a liberal interpret liberal events an article, and basically liberal myself, but I really am annoyed when the news I get his spine towards a liberal kind of direction and just as much as I wonder where it's from another direction. So I tried to find ways to get the news when I read it that is offers different perspectives. So I'm not kind of stuck with one perspective. I would think I'd be really, really terrible if all we did was read liberal magazines or conservative magazines and there was already perspective on society. So one of the things I tried to do is to read European newspapers, because they have a very different understanding of what goes on in America,

what's going on in the world, that American newspapers do. So I try to get a balanced, different perspective or a different understanding from doing that. So to investigate to take the time to look more deeply and probe to do the research to really understand what is going on. And one of the reasons we were having I was having some discussion this weekend about politics was that I was having lunch yesterday with a friend of mine, who just wrote a book called on the road to 911 which is being published by UC Berkeley press. And it's a first study of 911 being published by a University Press. And, and he spent, you know, since 911, and actually in some ways that research for him started before that. Years and years of study. And what he has to say so consequential You see, press is not going to print it until it goes through the lawyers and glue up a little bit sad because it's the release is going to be delayed, because lawyers are actually quite slow go to is carefully make sure that this is not going to be liable. But you know, five years of this Careful, careful kind of painstaking investigation of, you know, this whole thing. So investigation, and not to have simplistic ideas or quick ideas or opinionated ideas, and but rather take the time to really understand. And for me, part of that means is to be very wise about how we use opinions, how we how we come to opinions, and the role of opinions in our life. Because opinions more often than not, are going to be shown. And so to not succumb to opinions or soundbites, but to actually read the article all the way through, read a different article or several articles or be read For the politicians to study and investigate more deeply. And part of the reason why it's important in a non oppositional form of politics is that there are times when the information when everyone has it. Sometimes it's very rare to save information. And they spent the understanding differently different. Sometimes when you get all the information out there, it becomes much more obvious to everyone what the issues are. And I think this is one of the reasons why, in some countries, journalists are endangered species. They don't want to get the information out there. And even in this country, there seems to be sometimes pressure on media one way or the other. The next thing of is quality of insight based politics is effort or energy. And one of my favorite one of my favorite kind of theological jokes is some person died. went to heaven and finally had a chance to complain to God. You know, it's a mess down there. People are starving you people are killing each other and natural disasters, all these terrible things are happening. Do something. God do something that God said I did do something, I may you. So this tendency of you know, expecting other people to do something's up someone else they have to do it. Effort means that we can make the effort we get involved. Don't pass on the buck and then complain because other people are supposed to do it and it's easy to be kind of backseat drivers in politics. I think an insight based approach to politics that's trying to heal the opposition's and divisions requires engagement, effort, energy, to get involved and do something to follow through, be engaged. In diverse traditions. Sometimes this word for energy also has the quality of persistence. Hang in there. And over long term. Sometimes political life doesn't lend itself to easy solutions. I remember once I helped the San Francisco Zen Center with their they realized at some point after all the scandals in American Buddhism in the 1980s, that America that Zen center needed an ethics document with code of ethics with teachers in the process of dealing with conflict. And so they had a committee put together that document and then the committee presented to the Board and the community. And I've been I've been involved in center for who knows since 1975, or something on and off. know pretty well what goes on that community. And I have never seen so much conflict at Zen center as I saw around Trying to get this document approved by the community, a

document or an ethics. And that was at the board and the board is that center and board members are standing up and yelling at each other across the table about a document that's supposed to help them deal with conflict. And, and so it was clearly an impasse. So, it looks like what I think is gonna happen is it probably just couldn't happen. And then I came up with a little idea that might work for the way of the community finally will find its way forward with this thing. And so they liked my idea so much that they put me in the next committee. And, and I realized that if this if this document was going to get through the community, it needed to have the community had to have consensus around it. And the whole community had to somehow be involved. in shaping and approving this document, and I realized this is going to take a lot of energy, it's gonna take a lot of time, it would have been a lot easier if people just understood my infinite wisdom. And that, of course, I'm right. And just, you know, just accepted what I have to say. But what I realized was gonna take a lot of effort a lot of time. And that's it's actually took maybe two, two and a half years to do this process. I went up to Zen center once a week for meetings, we painstakingly went through this document, and then was sent out to different subcommittees instead of different people, and, you know, different disamatic we worked on and worked on it, until finally when it was on to ratify the document. I think, basically, you know, the board beyond you know, was like a non issue, you know, should we pass it off, you know, you know, what's next on the agenda? Sure. Whereas, the first time the first attempt to nose I took literally people were screaming and yelling and cursing each other. These are people, you know, sensitives. Very, very contentious issue. So energy putting time and to do the work that it takes to bring people on board, to have consensus, to have agreement to hear everybody out, to be able to work through the different things. One of the things I've learned over and over again, but I learned it, there's in-center also, in this process of the ethics document was, we had a small committee of about four of us, who were named people kind of crafting these new documents. And, you know, every comma was discussed and argued. And we also sometimes had a little tension among ourselves around this ethics document we were writing, it was committee because we had different opinions about how it should be worded in which we said which should be valid. And, you know, if we wouldn't we had one person at one of the end of the different idea, sometimes we reach kind of impasse. And sometimes people say, Well, you know, we can't seem to reformed. So I'll let you have your way. You know, we should let me have my way or something and I say, No, no, no, no. Let's stay in conflict. It's really good to stay in conflict or stay in attention, maybe tensions about a word. Let's stay in attention, if not agreement. And let's hang in there and keep the discussion going. Because if you stay in attention, if you stay with energy and presence there, then perhaps a new solution will arise, new possibilities arise that can't arise unless you stay in that area of tension. So put energy into into and have the wisdom to know how to stay in tension, so that new possibilities can arise. They work for everybody. So just stay in it put the energy in third quality. The fourth quality is happiness. Is there happiness for everyone involved in this process? Can there be happiness for everyone to have that as an ideal Many religious people like the Dalai Lama, Plato and different people have said, that's one of the William James, different people, that one of the highest goals that many religious people have, or many people have is happiness. That kind of was one of the great goals. And so one way or other people want to be happy. And they have to realize that that's also part of political life. And to consider is, you know, the gross national happiness of the country as opposed to as gross national product. I don't know if I mean, how



many of you read the paper last week, where they said the happiest place in the world was a little island in the Pacific called? canal was? Where was where was? Andrea? How do you pronounce by the water anyway? And Andrea Fella was the Peace Corps there. You can ask her people were happy. Anyway, they have some index. Now. I'm from Norway. Originally when I was buying In Norway number in their late 80s. They did a study of Norwegians survey of Norwegians, and asked how many of them were less happy than they were 10 years earlier. And the great majority of Norwegians felt that they were actually happier 10 years before. Interesting, but no one was willing to back the 10 years before. But somehow the way the society had developed and grown, it hadn't actually made them happier, even though they actually the country became more affluent. So they actually to consider happiness as an important quality. And in recent years has been a lot of studies on happiness letter books published on it, and more like scientific studies or psychological studies on it. So I think we have much better understanding about happiness than we've ever had before. And so, rather than looking for, you know, right and wrong, or victory, what is the way that makes finds happiness for people makes everyone happy? Is there such a way isn't such a thing. And then the next one is peace. To have peace or tranquility is an important quality, both in the engagement in political activity, and as the goal of political activity. I've known, I haven't done too many people involved with politics lately in a way that I knew many years ago. But there's a lot of people I know who've come to Buddhism in the 60s and early 70s, because they were involved in the radical politics of the 60s. And we're so bitterly disappointed at the heavy handed approach or the powerplay or there's conflict or the fighting infighting, or the sexism that existed in the radical movement in the 60s. And they're sort of scary, right. They left It was a find some other way of engaging in a wiser life. And then people I know where you found Buddhism but to make being at peace, a quality of how we engage in politics. So it's not the politics of anger. It's not the politics of fear. And that's a huge order. Because the fear and anger is kind of, you know, something which is comes very readily to all of us. And I think, you know, it's not uncommon for me to hear people who are really furious at some of the political leaders that they're around. And, and I don't know if it's so useful to be angry, it's certainly okay to be to not be supportive and not agree with them. But can we find a place to be effective in the world without being angry? I think it's one of the great challenges in all situations how to be effective. I see it with my children. No being sometimes being outside being a parent to be quite a challenge these younger kids, and there are times when I've reached the end of my line or just something has to happen here. And sometimes I use a very strong voice called my strong voice. No stop, like go to your room or something. And my wife hasn't approved to this strong voice I can use and it's very effective. You know, the problem stops. Great, well, that's what you need to do to set limits and be strong and great. Some days later, a week later, he had exactly the same tone of voice being directed to the younger brother. Or the younger brother, you know, the age of, you know, two and three. The, you know, some kids are just kind of sponges leaves To learn how to copy learning how to be in the world that copying how other people are. And so the here, anger, you know, and that's how you supposed to do when you go around, experimented with anger, or guess what they do. So, you know, so it can seem as anger and violence can be effective in the moment sometimes to get some results. But I think in the long term, it's counterproductive. So are there other ways of working with people that's not oppositional. And so it takes a lot of work, but certainly with parenting to find that way. And, but also at the political level, can

we find a way where peace is really the forefront of how we are in the world and also the goal for trying to reach we're trying to be at peace with the opposition, then we can't, you know, we have to be peaceful towards them and find a way to go forward and find a way to deal with the differences. That is not obvious. Looking for conquest or victory. So they have video peace of the forefront are the considerations. Then the fifth quality is focus or concentration. And it's a little bit like energy but this is like the keep the focus. And sometimes picking one cause picking one thing and really being focused and following through all the way. I'm quite inspired by people who had chose Chosen One thing just stayed on a statement of statement, like a woman who got the Nobel Peace Prize some years ago, because of her opposition to my mind. She picked up one thing, it just stayed on stayed with letters and letters, and those letters have stayed on this one thing with my mind and made a difference and eventually got the Nobel Prize. Or, you know, is Martin Luther King, they decided after three or four years ago, that's enough. I think I'll try something else. You know, it took years and years of effort. Persistence of focus. And part of this, you know, learning how to be peaceful. eddie's is the law, you know, his forte, the fuel for allowing us to stay focused in what we're doing. I'm also someone who is very instructive, what I'm reading about the least, about how in the late 60s and early 70s they're conservative right? was very alarmed by what was happening in this country with the liberal direction the country was taking. And they made us made image choices back then, that slowly and carefully put together the pieces that 20 years later would give them control of the government in 20 years, you know, maybe not so long but also a long time, slow and steady, keeping the focus keeping the focus the long term over the long term. Part of keeping The focus is actually having a long term vision. I read once in some book had nothing to do with Buddhism that teaching people to be in the here and now is a capitalist dream. Interesting because then you don't think about the future and the consequences for the future use bye bye bye Don't think about the results. So, to have some concern for long term, you know long term focus, a focus and concentration, which is going to lead you to like in the long term. And then the final aspect in Buddhism of the insight based approach to politics is equanimity. Thank you very acronym. It is a hugely important quality in Buddhist practice, but often misunderstood, because it can seem like a difference or aloofness. equanimity is the ability to stay present alert. peacefull without getting caught in the worlds of opposition, for and against without being caught, where we think we're operating where it's being caught, without losing your peace without losing, not getting reactive to what's going on. And I think that the Martin Luther King knew this very well, that it was his movement, civil rights movement was not going to work in America, unless they were able to do civil rights. People were not there wasn't going to work unless they kept the equanimity. I don't think he used that word. But he came to come to the same thing. So the story, I was teaching a retreat once this woman came and told me the story of when she went down was a white woman. And she when she went down to the south, in the 60s, to be part of the civil rights movement. And she said, she stood on a street corner doing some protests and these rednecks, racists came along in the pickup truck and saw them there and jumped out of the pickup truck and came over and started to beat them up. pounding them away, so she got beat up. So, apparently not too bad because the next day she came back the same same street corner. They stood there again. The same guys came along and jumped out of the pickup truck and did some more beating of them. So what do they do? The next day, they went back to the same street corner. The next time, the guy was standing over her with his fist,

poised to strike. And he looked at her and he said, What are you doing? And instead of being beat up, they had a conversation. Isn't that something that's remarkable. That takes equanimity. That takes an ability not to get caught up in reactivity. It takes a lot of bravery. It takes some understanding of focus of, you know, where where power can reside. There's tremendous power and that ability to nonviolent resistance in the face of even violence. In when the Czech Slovakia protocol has had this nonviolent protest against Russia in 1967, Slovakia almost became free of Russia. And what happened in those weeks was that the Russian soldiers who were there kind of quell their check Slovaks. They couldn't fight in the world Russia had to eventually Russia was able to squash the protests. But Russia had to do is they had to bring the soldiers out of Czechoslovakia and send new ones in there do you want to had an encounter with the Vikings putting flowers in their rifles in offering flowers and unique things to them, and people who hadn't been softened, hadn't been had presence of meaning someone, right, the people who have been indoctrinated, maybe those are the enemies and had to do it for several rounds before the Russians can actually kind of lay the protest down. So the ability to deal with opposition deal with conflict, even in violence, with equanimity, to deal with presence to do to have the wisdom understanding of when it's appropriate to do this. And I think there's a times high risk with kind of the maintaining a non violent approach, which is really central to this insight approach to to politics, because violence is always going to be oppositional. And when you use violence to get your way, the opponent is going to feel terrible. And sometimes it comes back to the next generation when it's extreme. In forms of violence, I'm amazed now that I'm getting old enough to be amazed at certain things. How long the pain lasts for more. There are people who are still killing the civil war in this country. I meet people who are still dealing with Armenians massacre. So the genocide that was almost 100 years ago in Turkey, still deeply painful still deeply influences who they are. And some years ago, I remember giving a talk here. I just come back, I'm gonna come back to Norway who I'm from, and I'd brought my son who was five years old. And so I'm the region and my wife is her family comes from Holland. And her parents were Dutch Jews, who went through the concentration camps and managed they managed to get out their parents, their parents hold Most of the time we die but, but hurt. My parents survived the concentration camps in Germany. And so I took my five year old son back to Norway. And remember just mentioning here and mentioning, I took it took him back to the farm in little teeny little place in Norway, there's like five farms. That's called Fronsdaal. I've never been there myself. It's like where, you know, 1848 or 1860. My family came from this little teeny replace. So I got to show my son, you know, where his father's family came from. It was kind of nice. And then I didn't tell tell the people here but actually started choking up as I said this because I said, I thought and when am I going to tell him about his grandpa, his his grandparents in the mother's side? Would their pain their suffering and actually, you know, it's been 50 years or more, and I'm still will kind of get choked up about something you know, I wasn't even alive or that long ago. The effect of it. So, you know, it goes on and on the effect, which is amazing. If we did a cost analysis, some of these decisions, you know, take into account 50 years. So, you know, violence can seem to have immediate effect, but non violence has a very different effect. Violence has an effect that lasts a long time. I'm honestly very different. You know, the, the work in South Africa and the peace and reconciliation, the Truth and Reconciliation Council, I think is a phenomenal thing what they did there. And they're also you know, that so much of that what happened South Africa happened on violence, even though there



was violence, or the scene there. It was basically nonviolent movement. To be it's phenomenally inspiring. But I say all this because have the ability, the presence, the strength, the energy, the commitment to be non oppositional in our conflict or non conflictual and opposition come to work through and not be in opposition not to see that person is the enemy. And to be willing to be beat up sometimes means being willing to die. And there are people who in our country who learned to die as soldiers, and we really descend people elsewhere to die for us. And I think that there being conflicts that have been resolved non violently in the sense last century where some of the people who fought for this non violent cause died in that process, but a lot fewer people died than if they picked up arms. So Gandhi, for example, his movement, there were people who died. And he refused to pick up guns, civil rights, people who died. And they didn't pick up guns. And some of the power of that was because they were willing to stand there in no environment opposition. So equanimity is a stepping stone in Buddhism to freedom. And if freedom is also one of the main guiding functions of insight based politics, then we have to understand that equanimity and peace and all these different qualities we're talking about tonight, are things that have to be mobilized and energized and engaged in so that we can find a way of being involved politically, that is not going to perpetuate conflict and division. It's easy to be Be divisive. It's not easy to heal the divisions. So I would rather that we started conversation in America, not about, you know, let's have a liberal, liberal religious movement to balance, you know, the conservative right? I would rather have a movement that found some way to heal the divisions is a naive, that's possible. That's for you to dislike. So I think that it's possible for Buddhists to be political. And I think that some of these principles that Buddhism has, has doesn't have a lot to say about politics, but it has some things. And these, these seven principles of insight based approach to politics is one of the things that has to offer Now I'm very curious what you think of that talk with with nine o'clock, so I'm gonna find out. Maybe I've created too much division here, bringing up politics. So thank you very much