

Buddhist Principles of Civic Responsibility

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So let's see, is it loud enough? Let's see, maybe a little louder. Probably the, let's see, is that getting louder still? How's it going for everyone? So for those of you who can't hear me, there are hearing assistant devices around the corner there in the outer hall. So, I'd like to mention the obvious that we're kind of coming into an historical moment in this country that we're all participating in with the election on Tuesday.

And I wanted to say some words about that relevant for this times that we're in. And I thought I would like to start where I've never started a Dharma talk before, is start with a prayer. But then I thought I should introduce the prayer with another prayer. Or at least a poem. And the reason for this is that coming out of the meditation now, it was so clear to me how meditation can provide us with a radically different orientation for how to be in the world than it is if we're only being pushed or led by the world of our thinking.

If we're only swimming in the labyrinth of thoughts, the maze of thoughts and ideas and concepts, there's a kind of a way in which there's no way out. It's kind of an endless, you know, imagine the on-ramps and off-ramps of a freeway that were just a figure eight. As soon as you get off, you're on again, and it takes you back and around and around, and there's no exit. And there's rush hour traffic, and you're slowly making your way around and around. There's something about getting caught in the world of thoughts, ideas, concepts, which leaves us in a very difficult world. A very difficult world of the projections we have about the future, the memories of the past, what we think our needs are.

A world in which we're focusing on objects of attention, objects of our hostility, objects of our desires, objects of our fears. And to have that thinking mind quiet, become stiller and quieter, so that something deeper can arise from the wellsprings within, we're amazingly wondrous beings. Wondrous beings of emotions, of feelings, of heart, of sources of wisdom, creativity.

And to be able to meet the world with the wondrous parts of who we are, rather than the scared parts of who we are. The wondrous parts of who we are, rather than the parts of us that are consumed with preoccupations that we have. And to be oriented to this historical moment from this deeper place, rather than the maze of thoughts and ideas and projections and fears and just that, you know, the media, the social, you know, the way that we could relate to often to our news these days, or the way we can, so many people now connect to the whole world through a screen.

I think it more often puts people up in the maze of thoughts and reactions and ideas, this place where we get caught. And we're kind of maybe even working on the habits of mind that keeps us caught. And so to step out of the screen world, out of the maze world into this deep wondrous world that we are, is the shift of orientation that gives us a very different understanding of what it means to be alive, what it means to be participating in our society. So in preparation for the poem that I'll read, and I'll tell you the poem that I wrote, there's a prayer that I wrote, or in any right I adapted it so it became a prayer. In the 2000s, there was a presidential candidate running for president by the name of Dennis Kucinich, a congressman from Ohio. And he was one of the great proponents of peace work in the world.

And he wanted there to be a Peace Corps, like a Peace Corps, but people got trained, like they got trained in military to fight. They get trained in a kind of a peace military for doing peace work in the world. And he won a Peace Award in 2010, I think. But anyway, he was running for president. And a friend of mine invited me to come have dinner with him. He was going to be in the area. And if I would do a kind of a prayer at the dinner. So that's all I knew. And I'd been to her house. And it wasn't that big of a house. I'd eaten at her dining room table. It wasn't that big. So I didn't think there'd be that many people there. It turned out, I didn't know she had a big backyard. And so it turned out the whole backyard was, everything was in the backyard with, you know, it was all catered with tables and people. And there were a lot of people. There was a political event, you know, like she had got all her friends to come to hear him give a talk and all that. So suddenly, you know, I don't know about prayers. You know, that's not my forte. And, but I was asked to do it. So what I'm going to read you is what I read, kind of for his sake, running for president. And I've adapted it a few times now.

But in preparation for that, I want to read a poem by Joy Harjo. The Eagle Poem, it's called. And it says something about prayer. To pray, you open your whole self to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon, to the whole voice that is you. And know there is more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know except in moments steadily growing. And in languages that aren't always sound, but other circles of motion. Like Eagle, that Sunday morning over Salt River, circled

in blue sky and wind, swept our hearts clean with sacred wings. We see you, see ourselves, and know that we must take the utmost care and kindness in all things. Breathe in knowing we are made of all this and breathe knowing we are truly blessed because we were born and die soon within a true circle of motion. Like eagle rounding out the morning inside us, we pray that it will be done in beauty, in beauty.”

So, Joy Harjo is one of the great Native American poets in this country. So, this is a very different understanding of prayer, what it means to pray. So, in beauty, in beauty. So this is a prayer now for civic involvement. As we participate in our democracy, may we be guided by the ten virtues of civic life.

- May we be generous so everyone is supported.
- May we have integrity so everyone can trust us.
- May we renounce selfish interest so everyone benefits.
- May we be honest so everyone hears what is true.
- May we be kind so everyone can relax.
- May we have self-control so everyone may be safe.
- May we be free of ill will so everyone can speak freely.
- May we be nonviolent so everyone feels valued.
- May we be patient so everyone can participate in their own way.
- May we not obstruct so that we can learn how to work together.

So there's ten qualities that in the classic Buddhist tradition are called the twelve qualities of a ruler, of a monarch. And, but there's a certain kind of way that in the United States that we're all meant to be participants in a democracy that as equals in a way that makes us all in a certain kind of way monarchs, make us all somehow participants in this life here. And so in the civic responsibility, civic engagement. And so what are the principles that guide that kind of involvement that are not simply the pursuit of power, not simply the pursuit of being right and conquering others, winning over others, Is there another way? Is there a way of cooperation? Is there a way of having differences and finding a third way that works for everyone?

I've kind of staked my adult life as a Buddhist on the idea that if we spend enough time in conflict and difficulties, that you can find a way that supports everyone. It's not a win-lose situation, but it takes, it's a challenge to find that. I've been in situations where I've been in conflict with people around something and we're having maybe a somewhat intense conversation about it. And the other person at some point says, well, have it your way. And I said, no, we can't do that. This is actually very important. I think if we stay in it, stay in the

intensity of it without being hostile long enough to see if we can find a way that is a third way, something that we haven't thought about yet. Not your way, not my way, but maybe there's a way that fits us both. And because I've seen that happen repeatedly, if you're willing to stay in the difficulty. And sometimes it takes a long time. But this idea of a third way that has everyone's well-being in account, is it naive? But I've seen it work in small ways. I've seen that these things are possible. And so it's not one where power and being right and winning is the first and foremost effort of the thing, but rather to be cooperative, to have conversations, find a way.

So, some people, you know, when they come to Buddhism, they're hoping that Buddhism has important things to say about everything in life. And the Buddha didn't have much to say about civic life that's relevant for our world today, unless you take some of the core ethical principles and apply them to civic life. But the Buddha was alive at a time that was radically different than our life. And it was the Bronze Age. Just to hear, Buddha lived in the Bronze Age. And there was no democracies in India at that time. Maybe there was burgeoning democracy in Greece at that time, maybe. But even that was kind of very different than what we have today. And, you know, there were kings that ruled back then who were kind of like dictators. You know, to stand up and protest to a king, back in the time of the Buddha, the ancient texts give graphic depictions, which I won't provide you with, of what the king would do to you. You know, with no hesitation. And so the, you know, there was no democracy, there was no courts, per se, that we have today. There was no laws in the same way we have today that can rely on. It was all on the whims of a ruler and what happened to the great extent. And, you know, there were no social services, you know, to go to. No social security, no retirement money. People weren't provided for by the government. There were no non-profits that were there to set up soup kitchens and take care of things in some ways. It was so radically different. And also, the ways people communicated and the ways that people affected each other was, to a big part, what you could see. It was the human interactions, human connections to each other.

And so when the Buddha talked about how to live together, he talked about the visible world, the behavior, the conduct that we had that everyone could see. They could see if they killed each other. And he said, don't do that. You could see if they were stealing from each other. And he said, this is not a good idea. You can kind of see or know, in some ways, unless it was done too secretly, you know, the sexual misconduct. That's a form of behavior between people. There was lying, not telling the truth. People could hear it. And then there was the problems that came from intoxication, which generally you kind of see it, that people are

too intoxicated. So it was all that. That's the world that they were swimming in back then in the Bronze Age. But now we have a society where we affect each other by how we vote. And it can have huge impact. We can affect each other by how we participate in social media and what we add there, what we say. And the effect that we have on people in the world around us now is invisible. We don't even see the effect we have. We affect others by what we consume. And then we affect the world by what happens after we flush it down the toilet or after we put it in the trash. Most people don't think about it. Once it's gone, it's gone. We don't think about it. But how we live our life has an effect that is not visible to us. And so it gets more and more complicated how this all works. And so this comes into play with civic responsibility, civic involvement, where the effect spills out in all kinds of different ways. And so to be careful is not just to avoid killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication. It involves some deeper principles, some deeper care. In Buddhist point of view, all guided by the wish to not cause harm. And how do we not cause harm in unseen ways? How do we not cause harm? And that's the primary motivation around ethics in Buddhism, is to live a life of non-harming.

So these 10 principles that were originally designed for encouraging kings to rule well, which then adapted for 20 years ago, so for a presidential candidate. And the best thing that happened out of doing that was Dennis Kucinich did ask me for a copy. What that happened to that copy, I have no idea. But so to not harm, but instead to be generous. But why be generous? So everyone feels supported. And it's one of the primary kind of messages that Buddha seemed to have wanted to give to monarchs in his time was to take care of the poor. And he has, the Buddha gave a lot of teachings or some teachings that described if you don't support the poor and take them out of poverty that it's going to be deleterious for the whole society. The whole society will start unraveling was his teaching. So take care of the poor, but take care of the poor so that everyone is supported. Don't have it a win-lose situation, but prosperity so everyone prospers. I think it's probably a fair assessment of our world that there's enough abundance in this world for everyone to live well. But most people don't live well because it's not shared equally and evenly. Even in this country here, United States, there's enough here. I mean, it's probably the wealth of 10 people, certain 10 people we have, that could probably reduce poverty in this country dramatically. But the concentration of wealth into a very few hands is unprecedented, I think. And is it healthy for us? I think there's a plentitude that can make everyone feel supported. Certain prosperity for everyone, except for those people who have to lose maybe a few tens of billions of dollars. We'll feel sorry for them, I guess. But they'll still be left with a lot. But this day of support and everyone's in it together. This day of we. How do we support everyone so everyone thrives is what's behind

this principle of be generous so everyone is supported.

May we have integrity so everyone can trust us. Trust is probably the biggest wealth that we have or one of the biggest wealth. What if we call trust a form of wealth? As opposed to money and bank accounts being wealth. I think that most wonderful things in our society, with our closest friends, with our closest family, if it's healthy and well, are based on a foundation of trusting each other. And trust goes a long way if we have integrity. And people trust our integrity. And perhaps integrity then becomes contagious.

Renouncing selfish interest so everyone benefits. So again, this idea that not hoarding, not just concern for ourselves, but concern for others. And there's a way in which benefiting others will come back and benefit ourselves. Maybe there's no economic models or theories or data to show this directly. But there's a classic thing in some cultures, some of them here in California, the Native American Potlatch cultures, where they've studied, apologists have studied, and pointed out that how the economics in these cultures work in a healthy way is that the gift keeps being given. And goods are kept in circulation. So the Kvatlas culture is one where people would come together periodically and do a huge gift giving kind of festivals, rituals where they'd give to each other and lots of giving. But as soon as someone then stopped giving, then it got constipated. So it has to keep going and keep going. And so how do we keep a gift economy, how do we keep generosity, how do we keep benefiting the world as something that keeps flowing? We benefit tremendously. How do we keep the gift of how we benefit from our society going so it doesn't get bottled nectar stuck in us, but keep benefiting, let it keep flowing. There's something about the cycles of generosity of giving that makes for a really healthy society.

May we be honest, everyone hears what is true. Nowadays truth is relevant. But in Buddhism to say the truth is to be true yourself. To be a true person. And a true person doesn't lie, doesn't manipulate, doesn't try to get their own way at any cost at all. A true person is someone who has integrity and is able to speak from that place.

May we be kind so everyone can relax. Imagine there was a society where no one was kind. Would you want to live in that society? Imagine all the kindness. Maybe I shouldn't use all. Imagine what you'd be like today as a person if no one had ever been kind to you. Growing up, was anybody kind to you? Did it happen occasionally? Did it make a difference for you that occasionally your parents were kind, your teachers were kind, your friends were kind? Imagine if you received nothing of it. What would it be like? I suspect that a lot of what's good about you was partly shaped by the kindness you received from others and maybe from strangers even. It's inconceivable to have a society that isn't based on kindness. And there's

also the gift of kindness. Can we keep that in circulation? Can we keep doing it and offering it back?

May we have self-control so everyone may be safe. One of the ideas in Buddhism is that restraint is a fundamentally important practice. Because we can't necessarily know what's going on in our mind. We can't control the mind sometimes, the impulses of the mind. The mind is a tricky thing. But we can have, the principle in Buddhism, we can have control about how the mind gets expressed in action. And the actions are actions of the body, the things we do with our body, and what we say. And now, what we type. What we do physically, we have more control over that than our capacity to control the mind. And it counts a lot to have that degree of self-control so that you don't cause harm. Whatever is difficult in your mind doesn't spill out. And one of the reasons that not having what's difficult in your mind spill out and affect others in harmful ways is that what goes out comes back. Or what goes out becomes a habit, gets reinforced, creates more discomfort, more problems inside. So to have enough self-control so that our behavior is not causing harm, our words don't cause harm, is one of the really important principles in Buddhism. And we're not meant to repress ourselves that way, but rather meditation is a way of really knowing ourselves well enough so that we can really understand how to be with what's challenging inside of ourselves in a skillful way, in a useful way. And one of the things that I've learned to do when I have difficulty in my mind and my inner life with what's going on, is not to act impulsively from it, but to tell people, you know, I'm challenged right now. You know, this is really difficult for me what's happening now. And you should probably know that I'm grumpy. So let's just be careful now. Me, I'll be careful. Maybe you can be careful with me until this mood that I have changes. But the ability to just be honest in a way that doesn't harm people, but actually protects people. So self-control. So everyone may be safe.

May we be free of ill will. The word translated here as ill will in the ancient language probably is a stronger word than ill will. It's actually hostility. So maybe they're the same or just little variations of each other. But to not have hostility, not act from hostility, I would say that's one of the cardinal principles in Buddhist ethics. Never act on hostility. In terms of self-control, restraint. If you have hostility, restrain yourself. Bite your tongue. Whatever it takes. Don't speak it. Wait. Come back. If you need to work something out with someone, go and process your hostility on your own or with a friend or something until it's settled enough. So you can come back and have a good conversation. Once I was doing a program here at IMC with a colleague, and I got really angry. We had a difficulty between us. So we went into the conference room there to have a little chat about what was going on. And at some point,

it was a hard conversation, at some point I said to my friend, can we pause? I think I need to calm down a little bit so I can come back in a more useful way in this conversation. And she was fine with that. I asked for it. So as opposed to just feeling like I have to keep fighting back or fighting and going and going and going, which probably would have been harmful for both of us. So I recognized the ill will that I had and I said, this is not good. Let's me find a way to settle down and calm down. And it worked out fine in the end.

May we be non-violent so everyone feels valued. How many people in our society don't feel valued? It's epidemic. I think, in our society. Here and there the people don't feel valued. There are some people who it's really chronic. Almost anywhere they go they don't feel valued. They don't feel respected. Their dignity is not allowed. I talked to someone recently who was a hospital chaplain who met someone, a homeless person who had come into the hospital and seemed like that person had never been respected, never had a friend in his whole life. And that's what he most wanted, was to have a friend.

May we be patient so everyone can participate in their own way. Everyone can participate in their own way. That's dangerous, isn't it? But this is the ninth of the ten principles. So you're building on all the others. Mutual respect so everyone can find their own way. And may we not obstruct. May we not hinder. So that we can learn how to work together. If we offer obstruction to people, if we hinder them and stop them and try to silence them, then there's no cooperation, there's no working together. So how do we have conversations so it feels like we're in it together? How do we learn to respect people? How do we learn to find a way?

So I would like to propose that in my reading of what's happening in this country right now, there's way too much emphasis on who's going to become the president, as if that is the crucial issue that's going to make or break the country. I'd like to propose something different. I think we're coming to a crisis, maybe, for each of you. What are you going to do? How are you going to participate in this civic life? Are you expecting the civic life to be solved by someone else out there who's going to do it all for us and make everything fine and you can continue on your life merrily as it is? I don't think that's the right way to live in a democracy. I think that to live in a democracy is to be participant in some way. And so how you are is very important. And so these 10 principles of civic participation. Doesn't mean you have to join a political party. Doesn't mean you have to go and get involved in so-called politics. But these are the ways that we can make a better society. And to start there. And then, if that's understood, then you can run for president. I'll come and do a prayer for you. So those are my thoughts for today. So no matter what happens on Tuesday, remember these ten princi-

ples. In the scenarios, different scenarios that people are predicting. So probably in all the scenarios that people are predicting or imagining might happen, they all need this. They all need individuals and people who rely on this. And maybe this will give you some strength and some inspiration and encouragement to how to go forward. And all of us contribute to a better world, better society. So thank you. Those are my thoughts on this historic times. And we have about 10 minutes before the end. So now we could try to, if you have any questions, comments, reflections on what I just said, testimonials.

Gil, thank you so much. Can you post that prayer or pass it out or something? I want to be able to reread it. It's already posted on the homepage at IMT's website. There's a, on the bottom right, there's a section called What's New? And then there's Reflections from Gil as part of that. And there you see it now. It's already there. What? Oh, the poem. Joy Harjo is called the Eagle Poem. You can find it online. I don't want to post her. It's H-A-R-J-O. Harjo. I think she's Cherokee. Wonderful woman. Wonderful, wonderful poet. And so Joy Harjo, the Eagle Poem. And you can also actually find her reading her poem online.

Gil, so I am aware that American friends or Quakers, they make all their decisions by consensus. But how they do it, I have no idea. Well, sometimes it takes them a very long time. And I don't know if I had the time exactly right, but I've been told that it took them 200 years to decide to be against slavery. Well, you know, it's kind of heartbreaking to hear that, but at least they came around. But yeah, consensus is really good. We tried to do that thing on consensus here at IMC. There have been times on the IMC board where we've taken a vote for something and one person doesn't, they're opposed even, they say, you know, they just choose not to vote. And I've said, no, no, okay, let's not make a decision today then. Let's give time for this. We want to have everyone feel like everyone participates. So at least let's make the effort at least. So then we maybe reach out to that person before the next board meeting and just find out what's going on and see if there's some way that we can make it work, whatever we're going to do here, so that everyone feels they can support it. But we can't expect that always. But at least we can make the effort for it. That's respectful.

Yeah, thank you. That was a nice talk. What kind of came up for me when I was listening to your remarks was the fact that I think we live in a time when there's an exceptional amount of fear, and I think a lot of what we're seeing behind it is fear, which is usually a very unhelpful emotion when it comes to doing all the wholesome things you describe. And I wonder if you could comment on that, especially the tension between wanting to engage positively and at the same time maybe being a little afraid for ourselves of what could happen. Thank you for the question. There are many, many ways that the fears in our society can be and maybe

should be addressed. And a small Buddhist organization like us or a Buddhist practitioner by themselves cannot address all the different ways they can be or should be done. But one of the specialties that Buddhism offers is the ability to come to terms with our own fear, to really be able to look at it deeply, settle it, come to some place where our fear no longer blocks us, no longer gets in our way. There still might be fear, but we now find and learn how to be free, so we can be wise with whatever fear we carry. Or our fear is settled, settled, and we can live without any anxiety. And there might be some fear, but no anxiety. That's a kind of radical thing. So the idea of looking, really knowing ourselves and learning how to become free of our own fear is a part of the gift of this practice that we do. The other side of that is to become a person who others don't have to fear. To be someone who can walk through the world safe, a friend of everyone, someone no one is afraid. And sometimes people are afraid for us even though we're a safe person. They don't know that. They might see you as belonging to a group of people that historically has been harmful to them. And so it's hard for them to distinguish between who's safe and who's not. But to really work on not taking for granted that people feel would think that you're automatically a safe person. But how can you be a safe person? How could you show up in a friendly way? So we give people the gift of fearlessness. And I think it's a great gift to give to our society. And again, to expect that other people are going to make everyone safe. It's a bit, I think, we can expect it if you want that someone else is going to do the work, but you have to do it too. So how do you come to terms with your fear? How do you develop yourself in such a way that you can walk through the world and be safe for people? Do you have the confidence to be able to show up in a way and feel safe. Even if people are angry with you, you have some way of being. How can you do that? It's not easy. But this practice can help that tremendously. So to go deep into this practice is part of the answer for you. Is that adequate to answer?

Hi. Well, as you just said, what bothers me sometimes is when I talk, the people I talk to about this sort of thing. There's an overwhelming sense of I'm one person. So I can't do anything. And can't make an impact. And I just want to say that when I sit on the cushion, I have kind of a ritual where I set my intention, why am I there, and I say to myself, may this meditation make me stronger so I am a force for good in the world and better the life of everyone I come in contact with and everyone they come in contact with. And it just goes on from there. Nice. But I just, like you just said, we can make a difference even though we're only one person. Every individual can make a difference. And there's a lovely story that I love. It's a Sufi story of some, I guess, some kind of maybe God or a genie or something, some spirit, offers this man two wishes. You can have anything you want. And so he says, well, wherever I go, I want to benefit the people around me. That's the first wish. The second wish, I don't want to know

that I'm doing it. And so he's given a bag, a big bag that he carries over his shoulder, filled with seeds. And there's a little hole in the bag. And it's always being replenished by the spirits or something. But wherever he walks, those seeds fall out. And they germinate and grow to something, flowers or trees or fruit, apple trees or something. And so it takes a long time for that to happen. He's long gone. He keeps walking. And so symbolically, we can always make a difference. But we don't necessarily see the actual results of making a difference. I've been changed by total strangers who spent five minutes with me. And their kindness and support, just wow, that was inspiring. That's possible? It can be done this way? And they never knew that they had such a big impact on me. We don't know when we're going to have an impact. We don't know when, you know, that we're kind to a local kid who's kind of having a lot of challenges. Maybe no one's ever been kind to the kid. And there's a glimmer of hope for that person that they never had before. So we don't know what seeds we're planting, but let's plant seeds anyway. And who knows what will happen? Who knows the influence you have? We have more influence than we realize if we are kind, if we're supportive, if we're friendly, if we're safe for others. So many people in our society are afraid. And probably the people who are saying what you said, I'm just me somehow. How can I do? I suspect that behind that is fear. Or some other kind of feeling of feeling somehow unworthy. Everyone is worthy. So, I wish you well.

And I had the idea that we don't know what's going to happen this week, of course, but hopefully it's all smooth and harmonious and everyone realizes in the last minute how good it is to cooperate and support each other and we'll live happily ever after. But I also have some thought that if there's enough challenges going on, that maybe we should have some kind of meeting, maybe be available for some discussion or some context for it all. So maybe it can be a Wednesday evening, maybe some kind of Zoom meeting, maybe if it's necessary or something. I don't know what's going to happen. And so I don't know, I guess the only place to really announce that is on what's new on the website, you know, in short notice like that. The Google calendar, if we put it there, it sometimes takes Google many hours to update, to make public what we put on the calendar. So just look at what's new and we'll see what makes sense. And I'm teaching a retreat next week. So for the next week we'll be thinking about the retreatants, you know, how do we care for them? But anyway, so that if you're interested in such a thing, if it looks like we have the need for something, look at what's new. So thank you very much, and may you all be civically responsible in these ten ways.