Virtuous Civil Engagement

Gil Fronsdal

November 01, 2026

Keywords: *Dhamma*, *Vinaya*, *bhikkhunīs*, *rāja*, civic participation, egalitarianism, monastic community, consensus, right action, greed-hatred-delusion

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And some of you know that there are elections in a couple of days. Really? Some of you.

And something I like doing over the years, when we get close to an election, especially when I used to teach Monday night—the night before—I would teach something that was relevant to elections. Sometimes I would teach something called the ten *dharmas*—the ten actions, ten activities of a *rāja*, a king—that came up in Buddhism as a kind of, maybe, alternative orientation to what rulership could be like. That was rulership infused with Buddhist values.

And then many years ago, now maybe twenty-five years ago or so—I don't know—2004, maybe, there was a presidential election where Denis Kucinich was running for president as a Democrat. A friend of mine, whose house I'd been to, had a little bit big dining room table, maybe could seat ten people. She invited me to have dinner with her and Denis Kucinich. It was going to be a dinner party, so I said yes, thinking, well, it's going to be interesting—kind of, you know, a group of people to talk with.

And I got there, and I didn't realize she had a big backyard. She had it catered with tables and canopies, and there were—I don't know—probably well over a hundred people there. But before I came, she asked me if I would do kind of a prayer or a blessing or something at the meal. Thinking it was a small group, I said sure.

And so what I did was I took the ten actions of a king and redid it for a democracy, where, in theory, we're all supposed to share rulership together. We're all kind of participants in an equal way. So I thought we could apply it to ourselves. This is one of the few prayers I've ever made up. So I don't know if you're distressed hearing this or—

So I called it “A Prayer for Political Responsibility.” As we engage in the public sphere, may we be guided by the ten virtues of political leadership. May we be generous, so everyone is

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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 that was my entry into American politics. I was still not an American citizen, so I couldn't vote, but I could do this. And so Denis Kucinich came over to me and said, “Oh, can I have a copy of that?” So that was kind of nice.

So, civic participation. It's interesting, as Buddhists, for me at least, to go back and look at the examples of what Buddha's teachings, or how he organized his community, might teach us. If you go back and look at the rules, the laws, or the procedures for the monastic community, mostly we look at the male community when we do this. There's a separate whole body of rules and procedures for the community of *bhikkhunīs*, of nuns.

There are two interesting orientations in this monastic community. Part of it is hierarchical, and part of it is egalitarian. These two go together, and they seem to operate in two different areas of life. The hierarchical one has to do with how people are trained and practice, and are taught Buddhism and Buddhist practice. You have a senior person who trains you, teaches you, and guides you.

In the monastic life, you're being guided in how to live by the monastic rules and how to conduct yourself in a way proper for being a monastic. That's a lot of things they have to keep in mind. It's not a simple thing to learn. And so there's a hierarchy of people who've been trained, who know that, who can train others.

You need to respect what they have to say. You have to somehow grant them certain deference because they're guiding you into something that's quite difficult. Maybe it's a challenge for you, and maybe there's resistance you have. But it's a training.

And so, you know, if you're going to learn a sport, maybe at a competitive level, you might have a coach. You have to give them some deference that they know what they're talking about. They might push you to do things which are difficult. So when you're talking about training, there's understood to be a hierarchy.

Part of that hierarchy goes into an emphasis on seniority. Someone who's more senior is more there to guide you, to support someone who's more junior. So they line up according to seniority, and they sit according to seniority. But maybe we can understand the primary

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reason for that as being because the monastic community is a training institution. It's where we're training and learning, practicing together.

So that's the hierarchical, which sometimes, just even using the word hierarchy, seems problematic for some of us in the West, including me. And so, you know, people hesitate around it, for sure.

But the other one is egalitarian, and that has to do with the governance of the monastic community. There, things were done more on an egalitarian level. This included issues of governance and also issues of ethical transgression: someone who broke the rules that the monastics would live by. Then there was more equality.

A brand-new monastic has just as much say in the governance of the monastic community as someone who's been a monastic for forty years. Someone who is a brand-new monastic is kind of charged with calling a more senior monastic on their ethical conduct, if it's somehow serious. So the governance and the ethical life of the community is understood to be more broadly egalitarian.

Where it comes into particular play related to American democracy is that, for issues of governance, the monastic community—the organization, the way it was described in the ancient texts—was democratic. It was done by vote. Interestingly, any monastic who was within the sphere, the local geography, locale, of a particular gathering of monastics, monks, or monastery, was required to come and vote. You had to participate.

Everyone's vote counted, and even if you were sick, you had to come to the gathering if it was an important meeting. Then they had different procedures for how the community as a whole made decisions. One of them was by consensus. As is described in the ancient texts, if there was some new proposal being offered, then it would be announced three times in the gathering.

If no one objected, then it was understood to be passed by consensus. Anybody could object. One objection was enough, and it could be someone who was ordained the day before. Everyone had equal say for that.

If they could not get to consensus that way, then remember, the whole community came; everyone had to be there. If they couldn't get consensus, then they would have a vote. Apparently, they had votes by colored sticks. That seems to have been the means, and somehow they passed out sticks, and the different colors would mean different things.

So there was, again apparently, an effort to get things done by consensus. But there was a way by which things could be done by majority vote. Sometimes some things were put

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into a committee, which is, you know, a great democratic tradition that maybe doesn't work sometimes. But they had these procedures set in which they operated.

So, you know, maybe it was around the same time as Athens that this was going on. Scholars think that the Buddha got this idea of democracy—that is, voting—from some of the sometimes-called republics, some of the small countries of his time where there seems to have been some kind of system of voting by, you know, as was common at the time, certain male citizens of the community or country.

At some point in Buddhism, maybe in the time of the Buddha or later, they also created a community of nuns who lived together very much the same way. What was unique about the community of nuns is that it was one of the few places a woman could go in the ancient world where they could live self-contained, independent from most male interference. They were second; there was a kind of seniority, but there was an imbalance where the male monastics had a certain seniority and authority over the female nuns. It was problematic, especially in the modern world.

But still, it was creating a very vibrant community of women where they could not be subservient to a husband or to a father or to, you know, other things. Back then, it was a pretty subservient life to be a woman in ancient India. So it provided something like this for women as well.

This idea that, in governance, or in certain ways, people came together in the monastic community as equals was also very interestingly done. I think that when you joined the monastic community, your caste, your family, your class, no longer was relevant from before you came into the community. You were no longer referred to by your class name, your caste name, or your family name. There was often a social hierarchy involved in the wider society of the time.

The beautiful metaphor that Buddha used for this was that, just like all the rivers—and he listed the Ganges and other rivers of ancient India—and how they all flow into the ocean, their names disappear when they come into the ocean, although all the water becomes ocean. So all the different social distinctions that exist in society, when people enter the monastic order as a monastic, disappear for them. People lived together who maybe wouldn't even talk to each other in societies around India at that time. But that all disappeared.

So it's a very, I think, remarkable creation of an alternative society that was radically different from the society of the time, from how people lived and struggled.

On one hand, there's an equality, and on the other hand, there's a kind of seniority that has

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to do with training. The training seniority has a lot to do with cultivating a certain degree of humility, receptivity, and being able to receive the transmission of the teachings and practice in a full way. Somehow, you can't do that if you don't have a certain kind of deference. I don't know if deference is the best word, but a certain kind of willingness to really sit and hear what someone has to say without protesting automatically or thinking that you know better.

This whole thing is also very interesting because, as far as we can tell from the ancient records, where it's pretty explicit, the Buddha did not appoint a successor. He was kind of the head of the order when he was alive, but he explicitly did not appoint someone to succeed him as the head of the order, the head of the monastic community. The monastic community had to find some way to govern together as a community. They were supposed to take the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya*, the *Dhamma* and the monastic rules, as their guide and support for how to live together and find their way.

That required, again, civic participation by the monastics. They had to interpret the rules together. They had to understand the *Dhamma* together. They had to operate in consensus. Everyone had a say when it came to issues of governance or how they were going to live together.

So this idea that, in a democracy where we vote, everyone should vote, is a kind of fascinating idea. We don't require it in this country. When I grew up in Italy, I had this idea that in Italy that was required. I don't know if that was true. I remember so many years ago now, so I don't know if it's true, but maybe in some places in the world that kind of idea is still present.

But we don't have it here. Is there a place for civic participation? Is there a place for us all to be careful about how we share and live a life in cooperation, or in the presence of other people in our society?

America has a very strong individualistic orientation. I was kind of stunned a little bit by the contrast between living on hippie communes in the United States when I was young, and going back to Norway to live in a commune there. Both of them were countercultural communities that decided to somehow step out of the ordinary life of the times.

The hippie communes that I stayed at—a number of them in California, in the United States—had almost a desire to really be separate from society, to do something completely self-contained. They were just completely taking care of themselves, growing their own food and doing their own thing. It was quite radical separation, kind of a distancing from society.

When I went back to Norway and lived in some of the communes there, I presented this kind

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of idea. The Norwegian hippies were horrified by what I had to say. Because yes, they were living this intentional community and alternative culture and everything. But in Norwegian culture, a socialist democracy, there was such a strong ethos in the community that you should also contribute back to society. You should be part of that contribution, part of that effort.

Having grown up with a very strong Norwegian ethos, I think there is as strong an individualistic orientation there as in the United States. But it doesn't have quite the same character. The individualism there is one that, yes, very much focuses on the independent individual, but one that then contributes to society, not one that holds itself radically away from everybody.

Recently, someone from Utah told me about how she grew up with all these people around her who had built major bunkers lined with rifles in the bunkers because, you know, apocalypses were coming or something. So they were well defended in their big, you know, forts that they built, bunkers. It's quite something to be so focused on surviving yourself, without any care about how we do it together as a community.

So, does Buddhism call for or suggest that we should be socially responsible, involved with civic participation? I find it very interesting that I don't think the Buddha ever said that, partly because it wasn't his role in his society at the time. He never assumed that he had that responsibility or authority to pronounce what people who were not his monastics—people who put themselves intentionally under his guidance—should or shouldn't be doing.

That whole orientation to making proclamations about what other people should do is a kind of problematic thing. I don't think that the Buddha ever did that. People have come to me asking me questions, kind of implying that I, as a Buddhist teacher, will make proclamations like this about, you know, what people should do and get people into shape. That orientation exists, but not necessarily in Buddhism, at least in the early Buddhism that I love studying.

But what there is, I think, as we know, is a very strong orientation to practice. Practice means for your own inner growth, for your own inner self-understanding, for understanding how we suffer, how we tighten up, how we create barriers between ourselves and others, how we create animosities and tensions and stress, and how we live selfishly. All these things, all these ways, are part and parcel of the complex of suffering that Buddhism is trying to address.

As we do this mindfulness practice, we're really taking a deep look inside of ourselves, really learning to sit quietly and peacefully. We allow the depth of who we are to be seen, and the depth of something good to grow inside of us. Two things will happen.

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One is that, as our attachments, the clinging, the very selfishness that is the source of suffering, begins to dissolve and quiet, there's a heightened sensitivity to other people. There's a heightened ability to see, understand, and feel the suffering of others, the joy of others. It isn't required to do that, but it just kind of comes with the territory. When we stop being so self-preoccupied or afraid or frozen or hurt in such a way that we can't really take in others, we start kind of waking up to the wider world, to greater sensitivity.

The same thing happens with the inner growth that Buddhism emphasizes. We grow in awareness, we grow in kindness, we grow in generosity, we grow in patience, we grow in these capacities, in joy and happiness. This growth inside spills over. This growth inside spills over, again, into how we relate to other people, how we see what's possible in relationship to other people.

We see it's possible not to close down. It's possible not to be selfish. It's possible not to be overbearing. It's possible to meet others with kindness. It's possible to meet others with generosity. It's possible to meet others so that we create a better world.

It's possible to meet others where we see them as equals in the participation of our family life, our communities' lives, our civic life. So this movement toward being me versus you, us versus them, this idea of not cooperating but imposing through power onto others, would, I think, naturally begin to fall away. It would almost feel unnatural. Naturally, it would feel unnatural as we do more and more of this practice.

We're not required to be involved in our civic life in a productive and useful way. But I believe that if we're really sensitive, if we really do this practice, something like this will begin arising from us. Does that mean we're all going to vote? I wouldn't say that. Does it mean we're all going to go do a particular social action that we think is the latest and greatest thing that we should be doing? I wouldn't say that.

I don't want to say what anybody should do, but I trust the good heart. I trust that each person will find for themselves, as they go through their day, that they'll do good to the people they care about. And who we care about expands from our family to our local community, to our tribe, to whatever it is. It keeps expanding.

That's one of the, I think, great aspects of Buddhist practice: our circle of care keeps expanding, expanding until it includes everyone. To not do that is to create artificial lines of division. How do we do that? How do we manage to live in this world, the civic world, with a sense of equality, a sense of shared participation?

If we don't behave that way, if we don't see it that way for ourselves, how do we see it that

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way for ourselves? Not because you believe that's the case. That maybe only goes so far. But my hope is that if you really want to do this well, practice. Really see yourself well.

Know the tricks of your mind. Know how you create division. Know how you can create unification. This is the great movement of Buddhism: to go from divisiveness to unification, to unity. To unify what's divided, to keep what's unified unified, and to keep growing.

That's explicitly what the Buddha teaches us to do. How we do that may be very personal. So, in that regard, hearing all this, maybe 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 I believe that this is worthwhile to do. I believe that if someone doesn't do this, even if just one person—if someone doesn't do this, if someone doesn't come to the end of selfishness or greed or hatred, if no one does that—then the whole world, I don't know if it really makes sense for the human species to continue. We've had a lot of things go extinct. But if we can do this, that's what's important.

Even if you can—one person can do this—that gives us hope. That gives us a possibility for something new, something different. Someone has to get to the bottom of greed, hate, and delusion. Someone has to begin living in this way. Otherwise, I don't know if there's any hope for us.

So maybe it's not you, because Buddhism doesn't require it. But maybe you're here as practitioners. Maybe, as your practice grows and develops, some of this will make sense to you. Some of this will say, “Oh yes. This sounds like what my heart wants to do. This feels like what wants to come out of me,” and then maybe live by it.

So, maybe, just maybe, you'll be inspired to vote. I have my own way of voting, you know, my own choices, and I certainly hope that my choices kind of win, I suppose. But I think more, I think I'd rather see everyone vote and participate than my side win. Maybe all vote or find our own way.

So, we have a few minutes now for questions, protests, alternative votes, objections.

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Hi, Gil. Yeah. I was kind of wondering what happens when egalitarianism comes to mean—

So slowly, please, because I don't have my hearing aid; it's not in.

What happens when egalitarianism comes to mean rewarding good behavior and bad behavior equally?

So, excuse me. So when egalitarianism does what?

Egalitarianism comes to mean rewarding good behavior and bad behavior equally.

When egalitarianism—can you give an example of where that happens?

I'm not sure if I have any sort of concrete examples, but sort of if someone's, like, maybe really diligent and working really hard, and someone is maybe not so much, and they get rewarded equally.

So egalitarian—you know—I don't know. I mean, it doesn't quite compute. I know that majority rule can cause unethical things and harm to be perpetuated. So egalitarianism and majority rule are not quite the same thing. But egalitarianism is seeing everyone as equal and treating everyone with equal respect.

So I'd have to know an example you're thinking about to know how to answer your question. I appreciate it, but okay.

Yeah, I don't know if I have any solid examples currently, but yeah. So thank you.

Is there a mic over there on that side? Or you might need to turn it up for me. Switched on.

Gil, I actually went and met some people yesterday at a social event, and there was some chatter about, you know, some trepidation about what the coming week could bring about. You know, hope that there's not any major violence or something like this coming up on the back of results that are not going for one party or the other. And really, you know, I feel really bad as a person. Like, I feel very blessed to be in California, where we seem to not be, you know, facing any major issues.

But I feel really bad sometimes thinking about people who fight for the general good, but then they end up in, you know, a bad situation. Like, how can I handle this? Because I feel a lot of guilt inside me sometimes that my life is going well, you know, when other people's lives are not going so well. Sorry. I don't know.

Does not everyone in California agree with you that things are going well in California? There are some people in California whose vote used to count in such a way that their party got to

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elect someone in Congress, but they lost that recently. I'm sure they don't feel that happy about having lost their ability to have that kind of choice.

So, there's, I think, a fair amount of fear about what might happen now or in the next few years. It's reasonable to have fear. I think fear has the biggest danger for any of us if fear translates into not responding, into feeling helpless, into not doing something. But I think fear has much less power over us if we actually participate and do something and step forward in whatever way we can.

But, you know, we can't solve all the problems that exist. But we might have to respond somehow. If you care enough to be afraid, maybe you can care enough to care, care enough to try to help and do something. It makes it a lot easier if we do something in our way.

Can you take the mic down?

Yeah. So in times like this, where it's before a big event, it's hard not to judge and to bring judgment to it. With that judgment, there's a certain amount of suffering. Yeah. And we want to act in the right way, as you were saying. Do you have any words around coming at whatever the results are, and all the uncertainty around it, without suffering but with action?

Okay, maybe I'll try to answer that last question. But first, I want to say something about the beginning of what you said. In Buddhist English, if we're allowed to have our own specialized English, judgment implies putting a value, a worth, a critique onto what's happening. Evaluation involves a careful consideration, evaluating and considering differences and contrasts and potential outcomes, and being wise about something.

Judgment narrows and tightens and, you know, insists and knows it: “I know what's right. I know what's wrong.” That becomes particularly problematic when the future is a prediction. Some people are predicting that if the vote goes one way, things will go better this way. Other people predict a different thing, and who knows what the right predictions are?

So it's very hard. Judgment has a stickiness to it. So be careful with that. But please evaluate carefully. Please be wise and intelligent, and consider all the different factors and what to do.

So, what was the question at the end? Can you say it again?

It's finding that place where you're maybe moving beyond judgment, but taking right action.

Right action. Well, I think that right action in Buddhism, one of the first areas of evaluation there, is what's motivating you. If it's motivated by anger, motivated by conceit, selfishness,

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hatred, hostility, or greed, maybe you shouldn't do it. Maybe that's a time to really do some searching inside of you and really see: Can you respond to where you're needed in this world without those motivations?

Then what you do, even if you fail, you've succeeded in seeding more goodwill into the world. But if you succeed with your hatred, you're probably going to generate more hatred in the world. So that's where I would begin looking at what right action is. Then recognizing that if you're trying to do a right action, in politics there are all these unintended consequences. There's all this difficulty of judging and knowing what's going on.

So then you're going beyond my education level for an answer, knowing what to do. Good luck.

I'm struck with the comparison with the monastic world, in the sense that our world outside the monastic world is fraught with deception, intended deception and unintended deception. That becomes such a difficult thing to tease apart and get to the truth when deception is so rampant. I can't imagine that deception existed in the monastic world, but how does that translate? How do we move to a world of lack of deception that is affecting our civic engagement so much?

I remember when—I don't know if this answers your question—but I remember when I was in, I think, maybe sixth grade. I was going to school in Italy, and somehow there was a lesson, a history lesson or something. We had to read this little article about propaganda in the Soviet Union back then and how it worked in the '60s. The teacher wanted us to be wise about how this kind of deception worked and understand it better.

I don't know why he was trying to—I was in sixth grade, so I don't know why. But I think becoming educated in how deception works, and the tricks of it, I think the rhetoric by which it's used, is a good thing to learn and to recognize and to know, at least for oneself. Some of that doesn't take that high an education level to recognize and look at how it's done.

But then the more delicate question is: How do you prevent deception or lies from spreading out across society? There are people who are trying to do that. Used to be that journalists were recognized as trying to do that, some of them heroically, at the cost of their lives. I believe it's still the case.

But nowadays, the integrity of journalists is so serious. I mean, part of the deception is to question the integrity of everyone who's critical. So it's a hard thing. There are a lot of hard things, and it's always been hard. It's not like it's newly hard now. It's always been hard.

I think the important thing for me is: never despair, never give up. Generally, when people

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despair and give up on the civic level, they're taking too big a window, too big a view of what the problem is, so that it just seems too monumental to have any role at all. Do what you can. Focus on what you can do, even if it's small, and you don't know how small it'll be.

Maybe we don't, again, it's a prediction. Sometimes the smallest thing might be the whole pivot for cultural change. You know, the cockroach movement in India. You know, I think it was one person who really triggered it and represented it, and the whole thing pivoted on one little action someone took. So who knows what your actions are going to do?

But never despair personally. There's no point in despairing about the world. We can evaluate the world in serious ways and see how serious these problems are, and how much suffering and pain is being done. Absolutely, we should see that. But it's a waste of time to despair for the world. If it's for yourself, get to work.

Is that okay?

Yeah, no, that's good. It reminds me of—I'm volunteering on a voter protection hotline, and a number of the calls have been around deception, about people trying to assess how to make their decision. I've heard this several times: “It's like what I see on TV.” And I say, “Have you ever considered how anyone can take a complicated issue and put the truth out within ten seconds? Is that real? Is that possible?”

If you don't think it's possible, maybe look elsewhere for your information.

Fantastic! So you already had an answer to your question.

Yeah, but not everything is on TV. A lot of us don't watch it anymore, and there's still a lot of deception.

Yes, thank you.

So, well, it is time for us to stop. Thank you all very much. And for those of you who are troubled by my bringing politics into the pristine, perfect *Dhamma*, I apologize. Maybe it's not what you expected. And may we all contribute to this world. Thank you.

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