

What About the Elections?
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Unless you've been living in a cave these last months, you know that 2004 is an election year in America and, to put it crudely, the U.S. presidency is up for grabs. Actually, I see lately that caves in some parts of the world are right up to date, with all the necessary communication gear.

Whether you are a Buddhist or not, the question is: what shall we do in this election year? Our world is in serious trouble. No need to spell it out here. War and armed violence are central expressions of this trouble. Our world is woven into one fabric. We know that actions taken or not taken by us here in the U.S. make a difference in the lives of people everywhere. The forces that give rise to war and violence are easily parsed into greed, hatred, and delusion, but skillful responses to these forces are not so clear. We are unlikely to see great masses of people taking up meditation . . . though it would be a good idea. The most important thing is to find ways that Americans can talk with each other across seemingly great divides—to talk about things that lead to life and liberation.

In the “Culamalunkya Sutta” the Buddha presents a parable. A man is wounded by an arrow dipped in poison. His friends carry him to a doctor for treatment. But the man will not allow the doctor to treat him until he gets answers to a bunch of questions: What was the caste of the man who wounded me? What was his name? Was he tall or short, fair or dark? Where does he live? Did he use a longbow or a crossbow? And so on. He lies there asking unanswerable questions while the poison does its work. The Buddha says, “All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die.”

The Buddha's point is: first things first. We know that if a doctor removes the arrow and treats the wound, that person has a chance to live. The answers to all of that person's questions—foolish ones and good ones— do nothing to prolong his or her life. The Buddha's “first thing” is the Four Noble Truths, leading directly to the end of suffering.

Extending this parable to apply to our democratic (or demi-democratic) nation is a nearly impossible undertaking. The arrow wounding our society carries a slow-acting poison that turns us into sleepwalkers, lost in dreams of acquisition and pleasure. Drugged like this, we are unable to see the fears that plague us, the political and economic forces that play on those fears, and the consequences of our actions for ourselves and for peoples around the world. But over the years and across many countries, Buddhadharma has proven to be a truly adaptable remedy.

First things first. We have to wake up as a society. We live in a country in which 90% of the people claim to look to religion for guidance, yet only 45% of eligible voters turn out for an election. Voter turnout for households with annual incomes under \$30,000 a year is 35%, contrasted with 70% for households with incomes of more than \$60,000. What does this say about the burden of poverty to further anesthetize people? If we really do cleave to spiritual values, we need to vote. If we are to follow our conscience, we must throw ourselves into a range of activities this year.

Some people understandably feel that we have no real choice among the candidates. Republican, Democrat, tweedledum, tweedledee. They feel that our system gives only lip service to democracy, while openly or quietly serving the interests of corporations and elites. Essentially I agree. Choosing Democrat A or Republican B is not what the Buddha had in mind when teaching about the end of suffering. In other circumstances I have been known to write in my own candidate and vote according to my conscience. But at this historical moment, it seems to me there is too much at stake. To allow our country and our world to continue lurching headlong through the fog of war is not okay. While we still have a vote to cast and choices to make we can follow the principle of “least harm;” identify and support candidates who will try to stop the killing without killing more people in the attempt.

I asked a circle of Buddhist activist friends what they thought we should do. Poet and engaged Buddhist theorist Ken Jones replied from Wales:

As far as I'm concerned the root spirit of compassion makes Buddhism a "humanism," and we need to assist the election of actively compassionate heads of state. The guidelines for doing so are surely the usual well-tried ones, especially mindfully keeping clear of the Three Fires! *[greed, hatred, and delusion—which Buddha identifies as the distortions and defilements that impede our awakening]*

This matter of choosing compassionate heads of state has dogged humankind throughout history. In this world of imperfect beings, who are they? All the great figures of the Axial Age — Shakyamuni Buddha, Confucius, the Hebrew prophets, and Greek philosophers — had something to say about how a just and peaceful society would arise and be led. In 13th century Japan, Zen Master Dogen wrote:

Because mountains do not refuse to be mountains, they can be mountains and reach great heights. Because wise rulers do not weary of their people they attract many people. “Many people” means a nation. “A wise ruler” may mean an emperor... This does not mean that they fail to offer rewards and punishments, but that they never tire of their people... Although people always desire to form a nation and to find a wise ruler, few of them fully understand the reason why a wise ruler is wise. Therefore, they are simply glad to be embraced by the wise ruler. They don't realize that they themselves are embracing a wise ruler.

In order to embrace a wise leader and be embraced by him (or her), we understand that our leaders can only be as wise as we ourselves are as a people. Along these lines, Santikaro Bhikkhu—Buddhist activist and disciple of the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu—writes:

At its best, Buddhism combines a profound realism that looks open-eyed into the vast maw of suffering with the most noble aspiration that seeks liberation for all beings. It seems to me that our gift and duty is to bring this inspired realism to bear on our current social realities, including the ways politics are played in our Nation. This involves engaging realistically with the system in place and seeing beyond it to something more in line with Buddhist values and teachings. How do we get from here to there mindful of both what is and what can be?

With this in mind I'd like to suggest a number of relevant activities to take up as individuals, as chapters, as communities, as a society.

1. Study

Former BPF board member and scholar Ken Kraft suggests that, "We can use this political season as a 'teaching moment' for engaged Buddhism." First, it has to be a 'learning moment.' We have much to learn about the workings of our political system, what the candidates really stand for, how our economy functions. We should also study the role of U.S. military power in the world. But along with this immersion in the given circumstances, there is much more to do.

- Identify the values, principles, and issues that are priorities to us as people of faith and as Buddhists. Set up study groups. This is an important opportunity to make connections across faith lines. Also across class lines and ethnic lines, listening to the views of communities of color and others who have long been disenfranchised.
- There is a need for various kinds of social analysis. For example, many fears plague our society and ourselves. Where does this fear come from and how can we face it? What light does the dharma shine on the external supports for our fears?
- Our studies can give particular emphasis to the history and techniques of nonviolent social change. How can we bring about change without demonizing or depersonalizing our opponents? This can also be directly linked to issues of war, military spending, arms sales abroad, and gun control at home.
- Figure out how candidates stand, in words and actions, on the values, principles, and issues you have identified. Share the results with others so we can make informed decisions about our votes.

2. Act

- Voter registration: there are local organizations you can linkup with. Find out the neighborhoods and communities where people are under-registered and go there. This year voter registration efforts are especially critical in the "swing states," where numbers may be very close but the electoral vote is winner-takes-all.
- Teach what you have learned. Organize town meetings and teach-ins on issues and on the elections themselves. Invite local and national candidates to share their views. Again this is may be best done as an interfaith activity. We have many allies in communities of faith, although often the Buddhists don't appear on their radar screens. You may have to reach out to them.
- Let the candidates and your representatives know that you are paying attention to issues of campaign finance and voter fraud. When you have done your homework, letters and phone call to them will have a real impact—if not in this election, then in the future. Joanna Macy adds, "Please include the huge and horrendous issue of voting machine technology. The...use and abuse of touch-screen voting could easily control the election."
- Maintain a strong presence and participation in the antiwar movement. This is not a side issue!
- When you have chosen a candidate—ideal or not—go out and work for him or her. Often this is person-to-person work. You can learn a lot.

3. Practice Patience & Compassion

- How we study and how we act also makes a difference in the world. My "Think Sangha" friend Jon Watts points out that, "...the Buddha taught that (sangha) should always gather and recess in harmony—

this being one of the keys for political longevity in the face of hostile outside forces.” However carefully we develop views, we have to recognize that no view provides the last word on a situation. Respectfully, we make room for various positions in a dialogue. That doesn’t mean we have to pussyfoot around each other—you’re nice, I’m nice. We need to test views, premises, and understanding with vigor. Really mix it up with each other. The challenge is to do this in a spirit of connection, non-duality.

- Non-duality, or what Dogen Zenji calls Identity-Action extends to our opponents, whether those be in an everyday discussion, in government, or in a distant nation. The deep truth is there is no separation of self and other. All life is part of one fabric. All people have the same wish for happiness as you or I; each of us has the same capacity for wrongdoing. This understanding has to inform all that we do, right down to our bones.

- Finally, we recognize that even our best intentions may fail. We may not stop the war. We may not feed or house all those in need. We may not end our own suffering. The key word is “yet.” Take the long view, and be persistent in your practice and in your work for peace. Even as we think we fail, other actions are taking place. But to accept this means practicing patience and equanimity. Surely the universe is realigning itself with what is wholesome. It just seems to move more slowly than we might wish.

This is really just an outline. Please tailor it to your own resources and inclinations. You will have noticed that in this piece I haven’t taken any outright political stands—unless it is political to stand for life. I have not spoken for or against candidates or administrations. In part this is to be careful about Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s tax-exempt status, which limits advocacy for specific candidates and legislation. In this age of disappearing legal rights, care is necessary. Also I hesitate to lay out my personal political analysis here. On the one hand I’ve got lots of opinions; on the other hand, like most of us, I have a lot more studying to do. People need to arrive at their own individual and collective positions. From this group wisdom we can find a political ground of compassion, and create a circle of feedback and dialogue with our leaders and with those who wish to be leaders. Eventually, some of us will lead. Whether our candidates win or lose, we can have confidence in our dharma view. And we will have learned a lot.

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