A SPIRITUAL VIEW OF THE ELECTION AND DAYS AHEAD

An edited transcript of a dharma talk given by Doug McGill at the Rochester Meditation Center on Thursday, January 5, 2017. For an audio of the talk, click here.

It's been two months since the election back on Nov. 8. Somehow it seems like it was just yesterday, psychologically.

We don’t normally talk politics at the Rochester Meditation Center and we’re not going to talk politics tonight, not directly. We want tonight to try to see politics, and more specifically how politics lands in our bodies, our minds and our consciousness, through a Dhamma lens, so we can learn.

In contrast to the many years that we’ve been meeting here, since 2004 already, there is something enormously different about this last election.

This differentness seems to very directly and urgently call to us to fold the election into our practice. Three weeks ago we had a potluck where many people told about how their night dreams had been invaded by the election, how anxiety and fears have skyrocketed and how meditation had become more difficult. The election landed like a body blow on many of us.

The impact of the election is not so different, in other words, from emotional experience of the very type that originally caused many of us start meditating in the first place. In a word, it’s suffering. Over the years many people have come to the Rochester Meditation Center because they’ve had a breakup with someone — a husband or wife, girlfriend or boyfriend. Or they are suddenly facing a serious illness.

Or they get to a point in life where many of us have been, where we are suddenly thrashing around, looking for the meaning of life itself, and feeling uprooted. Uncertain. As if all of the familiar touchstones that we use to make sense of life and feel comfortable with our life were taken away all at once. At times like this people come to meditation seeking roots, a solid grounding.

There is something about this recent election that has this quality to it, of an uprooting.

It's been two months since the election back on Nov. 8. Somehow it seems like it was just yesterday, psychologically. We don’t normally talk politics at the Rochester Meditation Center and we're not going to talk politics tonight, directly.

But it seems that in contrast to the many years that we've been meeting here, since 2004 already, there is something definitely different about this last election.

This differentness seems to very directly and urgently call to us to fold the election into our practice, especially by taking note of its impact on our emotional life, on our physical
life, on our mindfulness and our consciousness. Because the impact of this election has been very notable in all of those areas for many of us.

About three weeks ago we had a potluck where many people told about how their dreams had been affected by the election, how their sleep was disturbed and how their meditation had become more difficult. The election landed like a body blow on many of us.

So in other words the impact of the election is not so different from emotional experience of the type that originally caused many of us start meditation in the first place. In a word, suffering. Over the years many people have come to the Rochester Meditation Center because they've had a breakup with someone—a husband or wife, girlfriend or boyfriend. Or they are suddenly facing a serious illness. Or they get to a point in life where many of us have been, where we are suddenly thrashing around, looking for the meaning of life itself, and feeling uprooted. Uncertain. As if all of the familiar touchstones that we use to make sense of life and feel comfortable with our life were taken away all at once. At times like this people come to meditation seeking roots, a footing.

There is something about this recent election that had this quality to it, of an uprooting. Meditators all around the country, all around the world, have been holding meetings like this one tonight, to sit together and to make a conscious effort to consider the recent presidential election in relation to our practice of meditation and our spiritual life. To see if we might look into the tradition that we follow, which for the most part is insight meditation derived from Buddhism, to find some guidelines and some of those roots I was talking about just now.

So for tonight I've done a fair amount of web surfing and also gone into books and picked out a range of responses, comments and reflections from spiritual teachers, writers, political activists and others that I'd like to share with you tonight. In an effort to, as always, give you and me and all of us some handholds and some options, some tools to deal with our present circumstance. Maybe this will increase our ability to make sense of what's happening, to find some peace in the middle of the storm, and a sense of direction for the days and weeks ahead. For sure they will be stormy.

I believe it's desirable, in a discussion like this, to be very frank and forthright in discussing whatever experience we are having in response to the long campaign and to its conclusion on Nov. 8. Sometimes, this will require us to say words and to name names of the sort that are the very ones that have caused us, and are still causing us, a lot of anxiety and stress. So for example the 18-month campaign was jam-packed with emotional trigger words and images. It was filled with statements that stirred us up. In Buddhist terms, this language brought the defilements into very active life. I'm going to speak some of those phrases out loud tonight, because I think it is important to be direct and forthright. Within the refuge of this place, the sanctuary of this place, I think this gives us a precious opportunity to look at those trigger words and phrases within the vast sphere of wisdom and equanimity that we call conscious awareness.
This is a meditation in itself. I would hope that this Dhamma talk for me, and hopefully for all of us, prompts and inspires us to maintain a very vast expansive awareness around what we hear, and that we use this opportunity to very mindfully look at what is stirred up in us. And to see how we may be unconsciously reacting to our own emotions, and in this way creating unnecessary stress. Then, let's test ourselves to see whether we can find a way to be really skillful with those reactions. To our automatic emotional eruptions. We want to not proliferate too much and to be able instead to transform our anxieties and anger into wisdom and equanimity. We'd like to be still enough to distinctly notice and pick out the occasional wise thought that may appear in consciousness along with the usual fears.

Let's be really clear about what it is that has caused the roiling, the emotional roiling and reactivity so far. What has triggered this reactivity has been almost exclusively, so far, only language. Words. Spoken words and sometimes imagery that is presented to us via the media. And that's it. In the past month there have been announcements of new cabinet nominees and yesterday Congress started and all of that machinery is starting to roll along. But it's still all only words. It's speech. So that I think it's actually helpful to recognize just that and to know that whatever amount of distress we have felt up until now, has been the result almost entirely of speech landing into our minds and hearts. How are we responding to that?

Within the Buddhist teachings, Right Speech is a step on the Noble Eightfold Path. Right View is the first step, Right Thought is the second step, and Right Speech in the third step. In very clear, unmistakable terms, what the campaign for the presidency primarily generated was a tsunami of wrong speech. What is wrong speech? The Buddha defines it in four ways. First, it is harsh. We had a lot of harsh speech during campaign season just past, didn't we? Yes, stunningly so. Second, wrong speech is divisive, it sets people apart who could otherwise have quite easily found peace together. We had plenty of divisive speech in this campaign, yes? A huge amount of it, and so very divisive in so many ways. Third, wrong speech is untruthful. It lies. And we can absolutely say there was, once again, a virtually endless torrent of lies, fictions, falsehoods, misdirections and every other manner of deceptive speech deployed in the campaign. Enough to make you constantly wonder, what is the truth here, anyway? The fourth type of wrong speech is speech that is idle, distracting, not purposeful. Gossip is the quintessential wrong speech. So in this campaign, especially from the president elect, we heard a lot about beauty queens, and TV shows, and other stuff that whipped us all around like crazy, right?

If you are constantly wondering, in the way a soap opera addict does, about what will be the next feud between the President elect against whatever actress, political enemy, beauty queen or whomever, there's no time left to rationally consider global warming, the economy, the nuclear threat, growing inequality or anything else that has a substantive impact on our lives as citizens.
So if nothing else the presidential campaign of 2017 was a master class in wrong speech. To the degree that we can really feel this in our minds and bodies, seeing how the words and images landed and how we responded internally to them, to this degree we can clearly see how terribly damaging wrong speech can be to our consciousness. How disruptive. How hurtful. How like a virus wrong speech spreads into the body, the mind, into relationships between people, groups, communities and all of society.

One of the quotes that came from the president elect during the campaign was, "Torture works." He went on to propose that America must resume waterboarding and also adopt more extreme forms of torture to combat terrorism. Because "torture works." We needed to be similarly tough-minded, he said, in using our military such as by "bombing the hell out of ISIS," and by killing not only terrorists but all of their families, guilty or innocent, as well. Now, all of these are words and just words. Let's notice that. But how difficult those words are to hear, and how potentially hurtful they are, even in the absence of the actions they describe.

I could offer many more examples of wrong speech, but that's enough. I hope you are recalling a number of those statements that were made and just noticing how they feel in the body, and what kind of an effect they have on your whole thought process. What kinds of thoughts arise in response to wrong speech like this? Defensiveness? Protecting yourself? Fear? Anger? Any thinking about reaching out and punching? That was another thing that was said by the president elect, on more than one occasion, things like "I'd like to knock the crap of that guy." And in this way giving tacit approval for people to actually get physically violent in his rallies, which they often did.

So what's coming up, how does it feel in the body, and can you discover in this sanctuary of practice, a way to hold this reactivity of mind and body, and these intensely uncomfortable sensations in the body, in a way that is transformative? That dissolves the reactivity and the physical tension and leads to a wider space in which wisdom, ease, equanimity, and stronger and more powerful capacities of our heart and mind come into play?

For many of us of a certain age—wink wink—the present day resembles earlier periods of time in our lives. Within my life for example, I'm 61, there have been several wrenching turning points in history. Turning points in history, often violent. At such times there are terrific forces released that start to play out globally. We feel each and every one of these forces as they erupt and bring change in our own bodies and minds. We are at a point like this in history right now. Big, big changes are afoot that are potentially and inevitably become very destructive, happening now.

Thinking back in my own life, I was five and six years old at the height of the Cold War and I remember seeing on television pictures of East Germans tunneling under the Berlin Wall. I remember absorbing images of escapees who were shot dead while trying to escape. And I remember being so torn up about that. That there was somewhere in the world where people had to tunnel out an escape, and then sometimes people tried to climb over the world and they were shot dead. The Cold War was a difficult time. Not
to mention the Cuban Missile Crisis that happened then too. My parents built a bomb shelter in the basement. And they put 500 bucks worth of canned food in there, and a Geiger counter and a piss pot. It was a small house with four kids, and so they made the bomb shelter my bedroom. So there I was with the Geiger counter and the canned food. I'm sure that explains a lot about how I turned out later in life. [laughter] They started the siren system in Rochester at that time. The siren system in Rochester was built during the Cuban Missile Crisis and they said every Wednesday at 1 p.m. it would go off to test the system. But the time came, one week for some reason I was home alone and the sirens went off and it wasn't Wednesday at 1 p.m. I ran down to my bedroom, the bomb shelter, and thought I was going to be the only one to survive. I was terrified. I was there in that tiny room imagining that outside had been reduced to a wasteland with my Mom, Dad and my three siblings all dead. Then President Kennedy was shot, then Martin Luther King was shot, then Robert Kennedy was shot. The 1960s happened. I think many of us recall those times.

There was certainly a sense throughout the 1960s, with the counter-culture, the Vietnam War, a lot of people in society were trying to tear things down and create a new society. Those tended to be younger people. The youth and the older generations of this country were fighting with each about what kind of country we would have. After the Sunday morning sit, here at the meditation center, we have a coffee hour, and many times recently we've reflected that the amount of division in society in the 1960s is very reminiscent of what exists in this country today. The dividing lines are different but the sense of disquiet, division and tension are similar, as is a sickening sense that we are lumbering unstoppably towards catastrophe.

Remember that the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha's path to the end of suffering, is a path of non-violent resistance. Non-violent resistance was a very important guide throughout the Vietnam War and also the civil rights era, also mixed up in the 60s that I just mentioned. During that time and for many years after, thought not so much in recent years, many of us have delved deeply into non-violent resistance, what it means, how to do it, and its potential role in the transformation of our spirituality and our society.

The time has come in this country where non-violent resistance is coming up again, and it's a time once again to think about this strategy for life, individual and communal. Here in this group we can make connections between the Noble Eightfold Path that the Buddha prescribed for a life of harmony, within and among ourselves, and the path of non-violent resistance described by Ghandi as "satyagraha," by Martin Luther King as the "beloved community," the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia, the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, and many other examples.

Most of those who practice non-violent resistance are ordinary people in society, like us, who from a sense of conscience decide they must resist when they see injustice happen, and violence to innocents happen, and so on. The presidential campaign, especially in the rhetoric of the now President-elect, promised many new policies of oppression and discrimination in this way such as the proposed Muslim registry, the banning Muslim immigrants into the country, building a Great Wall against Mexicans,
and so on. Many minority groups felt threatened during this campaign—immigrants, women, Muslims, the handicapped, many more.

What are we resisting in the Noble Eightfold Path? Are we resisting a person with a name? A president with a name and an office? Is that what we are resisting? Are we resisting a political party? Are we resisting neighbors with a different skin color or different beliefs? Are we resisting different ideologies that ours? No.

The Noble Eightfold Path is non-violent resistance against greed, hatred and delusion commandeering our consciousness and taking over our lives. That is what we are resisting. It’s actually a paradox because if you just look a little deeper in the practice, we are not even truly resisting greed, hatred and delusion. We are so peaceful and so non-violent that we don’t even resist these vices coming into our minds. Just like tonight, right now, we let these thoughts arise, we even provoke them to a degree, we try to flush them out so in the safety of sangha we can take their exact measure.

Then we hold these thoughts, especially the scary ones, within the vast space of consciousness that we cultivate in meditation. Within this space, we hold all thoughts that arise lovingly and gently. They can do whatever they want in the vastness of consciousness, including fight each other if they must. They can twist around and make tornadoes and turn blue and blow up and whatever they want to do. It’s perfectly safe within our vast awareness for them to do all those things. Indeed our consciousness is the only place where they can safely do all those things. This is exactly why we learn how to understand our true nature as vast consciousness, so that potentially harmful thoughts and emotions are safely contained there and do all of their blowing up there and not in the world. Also we notice that once they are blown up, they are blown up and they are gone. Our demons quietly dissolve if we hold them in this way, for long enough until they dissolve. They simply expend all their energy and disappear.

This is the practice. This the Third Noble Truth. There is an end to suffering. You hold suffering safely in awareness and it comes to an end. Voila, we did it. That's the Noble Eightfold Path, it's non-violent resistance.

It’s my personal feeling that we are going to have many chances to test this in society in the coming years. We are. That’s my personal feeling. And I think it's good to be ready and it's a wonderful thing in a certain way to have this way to look at the path and see how practical it is, how useful it is.

Joan Halifax is a renowned and respected Zen Roshi. She is very active on Twitter, and I read Twitter. She's been posting four or five Tweets a day about how to respond to this new climate that we are in. I watched her New Year's tweets carefully and she obviously picked them carefully. In three of them she quoted Shantideva, the protagonist in one of the great Mahayana scriptures, "A Guide to the Bodhisattava's Way of Life." Shantideva says, "This entire world is disturbed with insanity due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves." To me that opens the possibility that this world might
become peaceful through the exertions of those become clear about themselves, in the way that hopefully we are doing tonight.

Another quote from Shantideva, "Joy in this world comes from desiring others to be happy, suffering in this world comes from desiring myself to be happy." Leonard Cohen, the great poet and singer, has been getting a lot of attention recently, partly because he recently passed away, tragically. And Joan Halifax quoted a line from one of his songs, which speaks very much to compassion, which is another way to understand the Noble Eightfold Path. The whole path of Buddhism is the path of compassion. Compassion is the inner activity that accomplishes the transformation of greed, hatred and delusion into loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

By holding stress and suffering in the vastness, when we know ourselves as vast, open awareness, we can transform suffering within this great space into wisdom, love and beauty. This is how Leonard Cohen put it in a song lyric, "I greet you from the other side of sorrow and despair, with a love so vast and shattered it will reach you everywhere."

Joan Halifax also tweeted a link to a short essay by a writer named William DeBuys, an environmental writer and conservationist who lives in New Mexico. He recently wrote a Dear America letter after the presidential election which he posted on the internet. Joan Halifax in one of her New Year's Day tweets said, "DuBuys speaks my heart and mind." So I thought I would read a couple of paragraphs from his letter. He says:

"Everything is at stake: the climate, the missiles, the courts, the Bill of Rights, a stable world order and functioning economy, not to mention the metaphysical goal MLK used to talk about: climbing the arc of the moral universe, which, as he said, is long but bends toward justice. Well, the arc just got a little longer.

"America, you need your true friends and most loyal children now more than ever. You need people to defend your lands from degradation and resource plunder. You need people who will uphold your ideals, even in a 'post-truth' world of Internet click-bait and bullshit at the speed of light. You need people who will not be cowed by bombast, bluster, or bullying. You need people who will take a stand."

The Dalai Lama was apparently attending a conference in Mongolia after the election, and a CNN reporter caught him while leaving the conference, and asked for his thoughts. The reporter asked about Trump's harsh speech during the campaign and oppressive policies he promised to implement against immigrants, religious minorities and other groups. Was he worried about the presidency of Donald Trump?

The Dalai Lama responded by saying, "I feel during the election the candidate has more freedom to express. Now, once they are elected, having the responsibility, then they have to carry their cooperation, their work, according to reality. So, I have no worries."

I love this quote from His Holiness. Not just because it's comforting in a sense because here's the Dalai Lama, saying, "No worries." Okay! [laughter]
It's a good thing to remember where the Dalai Lama is coming from. He has been not only the spiritual leader of Tibet but until recently the political leader of Tibet as well. And for more than 60 years, he and his country have been in heart-breaking, wrenching, tragic conflict with China which still often breaks out into full violence. Tibet has been struggling to maintain autonomy, not their complete sovereignty, but autonomy as a freestanding and continuing culture. They've been doing this since 1959 when the Dalai Lama had to flee Tibet because of the Chinese invasion that was strangling his country and endangering his life. So the Dalai Lama knows about epic historical change, historical turning points and dire times.

He has said a lot about non-violent resistance. So in the coming days we can think about what he has said along those lines. But I just want to highlight something very interesting in the quote I just offered that might be easy to miss, but offers a lot of wisdom if we take it in.

The Dalai Lama said that now that Trump is elected as President, he'll have to work according to reality. This is really important. This is the core of what the Dalai Lama said and is actually the most reassuring part. It's the basis of his then saying, "No worries." Because the way the Dalai Lama sees reality, is that he sees reality as a refuge. He sees reality as the safe place. He is not responding to the prapanca, which is the Pali word for mental proliferation. He is not responding to all of the disrupting harsh, divisive, lying and idle words of the campaign. He isn't taking that bait, you could say. This is all in the realm of speech and reactivity to speech. In an election clearly it's all about plucking on the heart strings, getting people fearful and getting votes. It's cynical as hell but that's the way it is. It's important for us to recognize that. The Dalai Lama sees that but he also feels that a reality principle is going to come in and stabilize things.

This is a statement of Dhamma because Dhamma says that if we can be clear about reality and align our actions with the way things are, that is with reality itself, and not with our hopes and illusions about reality, then things will work out. Things will work out, period. It is the ultimate reality principle.

So work with natural processes of reality that lead to peace and we'll be okay. That's an inspiring Dhamma message to me.

In the past, the Dalai Lama said this about non-violent resistance:

"I sometimes call the twentieth century a century of bloodshed, a century of war. Over this century there have been more conflicts, more bloodshed, and more weapons than ever before. Now, on the basis of the experience that we have all had this century, and of what we have learned from it, I think we should look to the next century [the one we are now in] to be one of dialogue. The principle of nonviolence should be practiced everywhere. This cannot be achieved simply by sitting here and praying. It means work and effort, and yet more effort."
The word "radical" has been coming up for me all week as I thought about this talk. We are witnessing a radical change in our politics, our history, and it all portends very possibly radical changes in our way of life, in our way of being citizens and acting as members of community. I looked up the word radical and found out that the etymological root of the word radical is what? Its root. The root of the word radical is root. Like a radish is a root. I love that because, again, the Dhamma principle is that we do vipassana precisely in order to see deeply, to the root. What is the root? The root is where we create suffering for ourselves. The principle is, if we can see clearly how we are making suffering for ourselves, a natural process kicks in that disables that process. We don't have to do any work other than clearly see it. It does take work to see it. It's the work of just sitting still with our suffering and making the effort to look. Once seen, there is a kind of natural dissolving that takes place. And I think that what we are doing right now, is that we are traveling to the root of suffering for ourselves as individuals, and collectively as a society and as a world of global citizens.

When we look to a person like the president elect and the rhetoric of the campaign, we are looking at the roots of suffering individually and collectively. Why? Because 99.9 percent of what was said in the campaign was quite transparently about greed, hatred and delusion. Especially so in the case of the winning candidate.

Greed is "take, take, take."

Hatred is "bash, bash, bash."

Delusion is just confusion and "What did he say? What does he mean? What's going on here?" There's never any clarity with delusion but that's the whole point because then it means you want to watch TV again, so there are more ratings, which generates more money. And on and on we go. The whole system is set up that way, if you see what I mean.

In a certain way we can be very grateful to our president elect for making things so doggone clear about his intentions. He offers many quotes where he says straight off how he operates from greed, hatred and delusion. For example, in a direct quote about greed, he told one campaign audience:

“My whole life has been about taking money, right? Taking money. I take, take, take, take. I'm a businessman, that's what I'm supposed to do. My job is to take money. My job is, in a sense, I hate to say it, to be greedy. And I'm greedy, I go like this [his arms motion a gathering in]—more, more, I want more, more, more. Now I'm going to be greedy for the United States. I'm going to be really greedy for the United States.”

Could that be any clearer a statement of loyalty to greed as a guiding ethic? Trump has also said, "I love war," which is a crystal clear endorsement of the defilement of hatred. Crystal clear. He went on to say, following that quote, "in a certain way," and his handlers tried to spin that positively. But you really can't spin "I love war." There it is. It slipped out.
We can make a big contribution to the overall stability of society by holding ourselves as quiet, still, knowing awareness. We recognize the reactivity within ourselves, but we also know how to hold ourselves in this way so that when reactivity arises, it does its dance for a while and then just dies.

Thich Nhat Hanh is another great Buddhist teacher of non-violent resistance. He became a monk during the Vietnam War and practiced non-violent resistance against the war. We have a lot to learn from him. We can take his teachings with us in the days, weeks and months ahead.

One of the stories he tells is about the exodus of the boat people, escaping from the Vietcong in boats commandeered by pirates, who were stealing money and sometimes raping women on board and causing mayhem. And Thich Nhat Hanh was quoting someone who'd been on a number of these hellish trips and said out of his wisdom, if one person on a boat was able to maintain equanimity and calm, then everybody else was able to as well.

Perhaps we could be that person in any boat that we might appear in, in this community or anywhere else we are, in the rocky times ahead.

We are preparing ourselves right now for this eventuality by diving to the root of our tradition to see what kind of wisdom and guidance we can get, and what kinds of tools we can have and carry with us along the way.

I want to say, too, it has struck me hard these past weeks, why were we surprised that what happened, happened? Doesn't it speak to the fact that we were not as open as we could have been to the suffering that is going on in this country? Because make no mistake, the election reflected a reality in this country. Were we in close enough touch with that reality?

There are 45 million people living in poverty. That's about 15 percent of the population. We don't see much of this in Rochester, this safe bubble. It's here though. There are several hundred homeless kids in the city of Rochester.

In 2015 there was $28.4 billion in bonuses paid on Wall Street. That's not salary, that's annual bonuses. In that same year, total wage compensation for everyone working on a minimum wage was $14 billion.

I could go on. There are so many statistics like this that point to a very grim reality, one in which, if we are honest, democracy itself is already deeply damaged if not for now in some ways completely destroyed. Can we see this? Are we looking deeply enough into American society to see how the very ways we organize and conduct ourselves creates suffering for ourselves, our neighbors and reaching to others globally? Are we looking deeply enough into these roots? Because sure enough, just as there are things that go wrong one might say in our internal makeup, that lead us to create suffering for
ourselves, those things get translated into the laws we pass, our policies and behaviors, our customs and attitudes, and these in turn generate more suffering. Our internal suffering gets amplified at a societal level in this way. So are we looking deep enough into the roots of this collective suffering? It's a question that is important, I think, to bring up.

Jack Kornfield, a leading teacher in the insight meditation tradition, recently said in a dharma talk at Spirit Rock after the presidential election:

"You've been training for this kind of a period we are going through for a long time. A training in steadiness, in compassion, in deep values. In times of uncertainty you become the real bodhisattva, a being dedicated to compassion for all life, no matter what."

Kornfield also said:

"In Zen, they say there are only two things. You sit, and you sweep the garden. And it doesn't matter how big the garden is. You quiet the mind, open the heart, and then you get up from sitting and you tend. Whether it's the climate, or whether it's immigrants or whatever it is that's in front of you that needs your care and attention."

The way I hear that, when we sit we go to the root. We make ourselves into this great expansiveness, and with that we have clarity, and we can see what's happening at the root level. We can make clear decisions about what types of thoughts and feelings to act on, and what not to. And once we have that type of clarity, as a result of transforming ourselves, or seeing ourselves in this new way, we can get up and go out in the world, holding ourselves as this spacious awareness. Then we can bring some of that peace and wisdom with us into the most difficult situations.

We have about ten minutes. What does this bring up for you? What thoughts occur? What insights occur that you could share? Or questions?

Q: It seems like the difficulty of tending the garden is, how to talk about some of these things with people where we see this gulf between ourselves and people who feel like "you did this these to us, you put us in this situation, you jerks." And this is not very helpful. To know how to talk about it. We need to talk with those people. We need to be ready. If things fall apart and get really bad, all the problems they are reacting to, are still there—terrorism, climate change, economic trouble. It is still coming. And it looks like they are doing all of the things that we as good liberal people think are wrong. It's going to get worse. So how do we talk? We need skillful means.

A: What comes to mind right away, is advice I've heard both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh give on many occasions to this question. They are both so practical. Thich Nhat Hanh says the thing to do is to make an assessment in any situation about the likelihood that a successful dialogue at some level can occur. Both Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama very much stress dialogue as having ultimate importance, as being
the ultimate form of right action. They talk about dialogue and communication such as we are having here. So, Thich Nhat Hanh says, you make an evaluation about the likelihood that there can be some common ground discovered, some openness between you and whatever other party. Knowing that full certainty is never possible, you make that assessment. If you think there’s a chance that dialogue can be established, and there can be some fruitful meeting of the mind and heart, go ahead. But if you think there’s no reasonable chance of that, you pass and move right along. This comes right out of the suttas, the Buddha says the same kind of thing many times. He says if you think you can share Dhamma with a person, do it; and if you can’t, just drop it and move on. It’s a very practical kind of a thing.

Q: For me it’s really become very clear that no matter what the relationship, with the people closest to me, or people at work, or people I hardly know, that if I approach the situation with even a little feeling of ill will, even a little bit, things screw up. It just doesn’t work. And so for me, that's always a first touchstone. And I've been noticing lately that if I touch there, and I calm there, that I'm very surprised at how relationships change, how the ability to talk with people change, something that I thought was going to be a problem, it's not a problem at all. And in fact is pretty nice.

A: I come to Thich Nhat Hanh a lot tonight, I think he has a lot of wisdom to offer. I remember during Gulf War II, in talks that he gave, people would tell Thich Nhat Hanh, "I'm sorry but I just can't have compassion for Dick Cheney or George Bush." Thich Nhat Hanh then would say gently but firmly, it's very important for us to understand we are no different from George Bush or Dick Cheney. To me, the mind shift that you just talked about, once you learn how to do it, it's not that big a thing. It's just a matter of internally allowing yourself to do it, and creating this large space in which the two of you can be there. And then you recognize common humanity. Recognizing that others are having a tough time with life just like we are, just like I am. Then things can start to move along with a flow at that point. Thich Nhat Hanh's point was to do the same thing with our leaders. That doesn't preclude the option we have to carry out non-violent resistance, march on Washington, petition, and do every other thing we need to, to fight for peace and justice. But if we can accomplish that step of compassion first, then it means that everything that we do will not be out of ill-will and will not be creating those karmic counter-punches which will always come if you have ill-will. People will smell it, they will smell the smallest amount of it, and you'll get it back in equal amount. It sounds like heresy at first to say, but if I can muster compassion for Trump, then everything goes better in my own reflections, and how I feel, and the sense of confidence in moving forward, like giving a talk tonight. The more I read of what he has actually said, the easier it is for me to feel compassion for him. I say this recognizing that I do the same thing in my own way: the man has a hole in his life so big that no amount of wealth, and skyscrapers, and women and even the presidency itself is going to fill it up. That's a sad, sad commentary. I do the same thing on a different scale. I don't have any skyscrapers to fill up my hole. [laughter] But I see how I also try to satisfy my sense of emptiness with things and then it's like oh, my gosh, the compassion that comes up is simply immense, seemingly infinite. And just this opens the space, the vastness. The very hole of neediness becomes the vastness of compassion. It's powerful.
Q: My sister's marriage is a microcosm of the United States right now. She says so. She is a lifelong liberal, progressive. She married someone who is Republican and has voted Republican his whole life. Then Trump happened. She had to, and has to, navigate—they both have to navigate through all of that territory. And so I'm so curious about how she does it, and what are their conversations like. She has talked to me about what this looks like. She says they are in love, completely and totally together. They are each other's biggest fan and supporter. What they do is find out about the other. They ask questions, they find out, they discover, they learn about the other's thoughts, feelings, concerns, hopes, goals, views. And they just keep finding out about each other. And she says it's going pretty well.

A: Beautiful. The power of dialogue, right there, eh? The transformative power. That's a wonderful story. Maybe she could come here one night and tell us all about that. That would be wonderful.