

Electing Freedom

Are you experiencing strong, difficult emotions due to the upcoming election? Four Buddhists offer advice for dealing with despair, anger, grief, and anxiety.



People in Seattle, Washington, waiting to vote at the 2022 presidential election. As Buddhist teacher Ilseung Subling says, "Voting is the expression of our commitment to ourselves, one another, this country, and this world."

Overcoming Despair

All things are impermanent, even political situations
seemingly beyond repair. GUO GU on hope

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG NOVICE, my teacher, Master Sheng Yen, would tell me that it's quite normal when things don't turn out the way one expects, and it's uncommon for things to go smoothly. "Face everything with an ordinary mind," he advised.

An ordinary mind, which is a mind unfazed by vexations and deluded views, is undaunted in the face of difficulties. Why undaunted? Because all things are impermanent, suffering is a part of life, and the true nature of all things is freedom. To deeply understand these principles, even in the midst of political turmoil, is to practice the buddhadharma.

Centuries ago, Chan master Mazu Daoyi (709–788) taught that the "ordinary mind is the Way" after the devastating An Lushan Rebellion, which involved eight years of political, social, economic, and intellectual upheaval during the Tang dynasty (618–907). This insurrection resulted in thirty-six million deaths, drastic migration, and infrastructural collapse that weakened the Tang empire, leading to its eventual demise. How could Mazu encourage practitioners to have an ordinary mind amidst such chaos and despair? What does this teaching mean in light of our own time?

We, too, are living in a period of great unrest fueled by political ideologies. It's routine for politicians to try to advance their agendas at all costs and for political groups to be corrupt. We live in samsara, the world of suffering. Sentient beings here are born out of ignorance and fueled by greed and anger. So, of course it is natural for things to go wrong; it's common for people to be selfish, even to the extent of sabotaging others. Everyone is living out their own narrative.

People typically see others through a self-referential lens, and thus are driven by the polarities of gaining and losing, having and lacking, seeking and rejecting, and, ultimately, success and failure. But, whether in

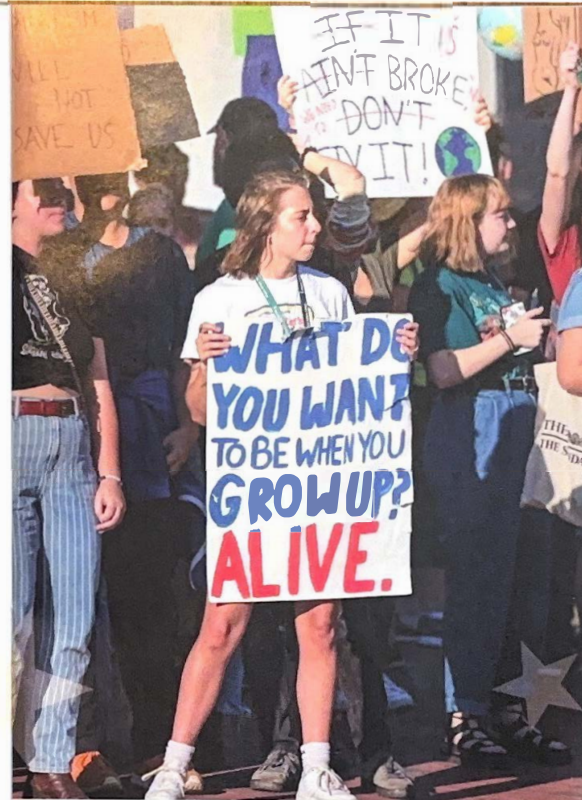
politics or everyday life, there are no real winners and losers, selfing and othering harms everyone. We easily notice such unskillful behavior of other people, but we must also have the humility to recognize that we engage in the same habits. Each of us contributes to the ripening of conditions.

The ordinary mind accepts that everything changes, and it sees that change is full of potential. In the grand scheme of things, everything is workable. As long as we practice and engage with the world for the benefit of others, humanity will survive the rise and fall of any politician or ideology.

Politics is, by its very nature, an outcome-oriented activity, and the goals are often driven by self-oriented interests and views. Buddhadharma, however, is the opposite. Living in accordance with it requires that we not be fixed on self-oriented outcomes. We must act and respond to injustice and society's ills, but we must do so with an ordinary mind, free of mental hindrances. We do what needs to be done and what can be done in any given situation, not for ourselves but for the benefit of all.

Working with change allows us to be creative, resourceful, and adaptive. The ordinary mind recognizes that difficulties are opportunities. Without adversity, how could humanity bring forth resilience and creativity? Without impermanence, how is a better future possible?

People are shaped by their upbringing and personal suffering. The ordinary mind embraces suffering as part of life. Suffering manifests only when we expect things to be otherwise; it disappears if we ground ourselves in selfless wisdom. With the acceptance of suffering, we can focus on what's important. On the other hand, by attempting to escape suffering, we shelter ourselves in the cave of ignorance—there is no growth, no possibility, and no life. Resisting suffering,



In September 2019, young protesters hold up signs at the International Climate Justice Rally in Asheville, North Carolina.

obstacles turn into opportunities, and despair shifts to hope. We begin to make allies, even among those we dislike. When we're not fixated on our own views and positions, new possibilities can arise.

It is so because the true nature of everything is freedom, and everyone consciously or unconsciously strives for this freedom. Even though, on the surface, political striving is characterized by greed and anger stemming from ignorance, the core is actually freedom. All things are without self, nothing is graspable, and living by this principle is freedom.

Mazu's wisdom of the ordinary mind sees change and suffering as potential. Only ignorance gives the illusion of permanence, control, and power. Anything can happen at any time. A perceived loss may actually turn out to be a gain, and what appears to be a win may come at a great cost. We must face the tides of changing politics with hope and action. This is the freedom of a selfless, ordinary mind.

we become entangled in endless attempts to control others and to not be controlled. We see this in politics; the harder one group pushes, the harder is the pushback, thereby creating more enemies than allies. In all this, the sense of self is fortified.

Embracing suffering does not mean that we accept everything pessimistically. We simply recognize the various conditions at play, adapt to them, wait for some conditions to change, and create new conditions to help the situation. Doing what should and can be done for the benefit of all makes life meaningful.

The truth is, when we embrace suffering, we open up the possibility of working with it, even transcending it. Suffering no longer has a hold on us,



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