

Practicing Democracy Online



An increasing number of our interactions about democracy occur online. We turn to our favorite websites, YouTube channels, and chat rooms for research, dialogue, and debate, often as a replacement for pursuing face-to-face opportunities. More than ever, we need spiritual practices in these online spaces — practices that support the democratic values and virtues of liberty, equality, empathy, open-mindedness, truthfulness, and respect. To help foster healthy and wise engagements with one another online, we offer these suggestions.

1

Get Grounded

Many headlines and stories about democracy aim to reel people in and ignite their emotions. Individual passions for certain issues can lead to fissures in relationships as easily online as in person. A way to stay connected to the democratic value of acting on behalf of the common good is to ground yourself, especially before turning on a screen.

Use these steps to get grounded:

- Sit comfortably in front of your device or computer for one to five minutes.
- Take long, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Envision the headlines or comments that trigger you during a typical session on the Internet. Does your body tense? Does your heartbeat accelerate? Ask those parts of your body to relax.
- Ask yourself what sites you may visit that not only remind you of your passion, but of peace and justice work in the world.
- Imagine that you encounter some difficult content; then try to visualize a response to harsh comments where you honor your passion but also respect the dignity of others.

Carry this sense of balance with you as you turn on your screen.

2

Limit Online Time

Self-discipline and accountability are important virtues in democracy. All too often, they fall by the wayside when we interact online. What begins as a chance to check the latest news leads to clicking link after link.

Setting a timer is an easy way to make sure you don't spend too much time staring at a screen or allowing a chat conversation to take over your day. You can also choose to limit your browsing to a certain number of websites or decide to engage with only one person. After the allotted access ends, put your device down or turn it off. As you turn off your device, say to yourself: "I've had all the time with this that I needed."

Remember, too, that even though a democracy counts on its citizens to be aware and engaged, activism can wear you down. If your emotions are stirring about something you witness online, give yourself a timeout from the issue for a few hours or even days. You may want to curtail or stop interacting online during a certain period of the year, such as Lent, Ramadan, or over the summer. Or you may choose to delete a social media account in favor of in-person relationships. Find what works for you as a timeout — to pray, meditate, ground yourself, or relax — before re-entering spaces of online civic participation.

3

Greet Others Online

In our packed days, it might seem that we do not have time to practice humility, respect, and peacefulness; yet these practices are at the heart of democratic engagement. People in the fast-paced tech world understand our busyness, but also the need to slow down. To transform a frenetic culture, Chade-Meng Tan brought mindfulness practices to his work at Google. Tan details his journey in the books *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)* and *Joy on Demand: The Art of Discovering the Happiness Within*.

Tan describes the practice of mindful emailing, which he calls being intentional about the words you use and the purpose behind sending emails. Emails can be misinterpreted easily. Anger and frustration can be read in a message that was never intended to communicate those emotions. To practice mindful emailing, first think of your recipient as if you were personally greeting him or her. That open attitude sets a different tone as you move forward in the communication. The practice then becomes “to lead with kindness in the first words upon greeting someone,” as Tobin Hart explains in *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation*. Taking this small step of emphasizing mindfulness and kindness in emailing, and not communicating from places of reactivity, can make a world of difference.

4

Look for a Person’s Essence

Democracy requires that we listen to others sincerely, even when there is disagreement. But how does this work online? When you consider the person on the other end of the comment or video, what would it mean to listen with the intent to draw out their true essence or identify their good intentions, instead of listening with the intent to debate or argue with them? So often people want to prove their point or listen only until they get a chance to say their piece.

Gay Hendricks realized there is another way to interact. In his reflection in *Be the Change: How Meditation Can Transform You and the World*, edited by Ed and Deb Shapiro, he writes, “I realized that instead, maybe I could listen ... with the purpose of drawing out [their] real essence. Once we started to lock into those deeper intentions, life took on a new way of being because at the core there is a resonance that we share.”

Take a moment to consider what experiences have shaped those with whom you interact online. What relationships influence them? What are their strengths and weakness that may not be apparent at first glance? What would it be like to engage with others, not to argue your point, but to find out what is in their hearts?

Share this practice with a friend, and then discuss your experience. If more people listened with intent to draw out another's essence, how would it change our behavior as a nation?

5

Examine News Stories from Multiple Angles

Most U.S. citizens admire the individual and collective pursuit of excellence and seek to be open-minded and fair. You can practice these democratic virtues and broaden your worldview by seeking out a variety of online media. Exploring a news story on multiple websites helps you see the narrative from different angles. You can start with Associated Press or Reuters reports, but also consult academic journals whose authors spend their careers researching certain issues. Then check out some of the more partisan and political sites. This process takes more time, but listening to multiple stories and voices provides a richer and more diverse foundation for our life together.

6

Explore Positive Internet Paths

Pursuing a democratic way of life means being responsible and staying informed. Connecting to the latest online content can achieve this goal. However, sometimes you may find yourself clicking on links that lead you down some dark paths. It's important to be informed about stories of disasters, emergencies, and political intrigue, but you do yourself a disservice if you only follow negative news. Looking at positive images and stories helps your mental state and productivity. Make it a habit to find a positive news story to balance every negative one you read.

7

Work Toward Healthy Conversation

Have you ever wanted to explain yourself more to people online or to understand their perspectives better? It is worth asking how our conversations and interactions contribute to healthy engagement with others. Treating others with dignity and consideration fosters the democratic values of equality, justice for all, and commitment to the common good.

In online communities, consideration and understanding can easily become derailed by anonymous comments and heated exchanges. Even if you disagree with someone, ask more questions about their life story or what influences their beliefs. Find out what you have in common and build mutuality, not difference. This approach can change the trajectory of a conversation. On a larger scale, it encourages dialogue in our democracy.

8

Pass the Peace

Even when you work at understanding others online, you likely will have to interact with someone who will not engage in acts of relationship or reconciliation. Some people are just looking for a fight and will not back down. In those moments, honor yourself and have the courage and resolve to back away.

When you cannot engage with someone, imagine that you are passing the peace to them. Then move on, knowing your last act in that encounter was a practice of intentionally wishing them well. If you return to the conflict in your mind later, simply pass the peace to them again and continue with your day.

9

Dive Under the Emotions

Engaging online with images and stories about important democratic matters can kindle strong emotions. Sometimes the emotions are joyful; other times fear and anxiety are triggered. The adrenaline rushes of these responses can be overwhelming.

This practice invites you to welcome the anger, fear, and anxiety. In the first step, take a deep breath and acknowledge the emotion that you feel instead of trying to ignore it or let it consume you. Next, close your eyes and give the emotion a personality and/or a shape. Perhaps it takes on the persona of an animal or character. Ask it why it is there and what it needs or longs for. Chances are, it is trying to protect you from something or help you figure out your passion for what you think the world needs. Finally, reflect upon what this emotional part needs to allow it to relax.

Often your wisdom will arise when you welcome these emotions instead of reacting to them. Reflecting on emotions gives you a wonderful place to start when you encounter diverse perspectives.

10

Forgive the Ignorance

Recognizing the humanity in all citizens is essential for a functioning democracy. In any relationship, there will come a time when forgiveness will be necessary to move toward humanizing others. "Forgiveness is not about denying the suffering or ignoring the depth of our feelings," write Ed and Deb Shapiro in *Be the Change*. Forgiveness is not about forgetting, justifying, or giving an excuse for what happened. "Rather," they continue, "what we are forgiving is the ignorance that led to such behavior. ... As a Jew, Ed was dumbstruck when his teacher, Swami Satchidananda, said, 'You even have to forgive Adolf Hitler.' But then Satchidananda added, 'You don't forgive the act, but you forgive the ignorance that perpetrated it. You forgive the being inside and hope they will learn and change.'"

If you are driven by bitterness, you risk perpetuating the same version of hatred that fuels the other party. The act of forgiving people's ignorance helps focus your mind and intentions toward peace while still working for justice and healing.

11

Try Tonglen for Democratic Connections

It is impossible to connect with every constituency online or to regularly address every single issue that impacts our democracy. There are, however, spiritual ways to make these connections. Tonglen is a Buddhist practice to transform dark energy into light. Pema Chödrön describes it this way in *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*: "In its essence, this practice of tonglen is, when anything is painful or undesirable, to breathe it in. That's another way of saying you don't resist it. You surrender to yourself, you acknowledge who you are, you honor yourself. As unwanted feelings and emotions arise, you breathe them in and connect with what all humans feel. We all know what it is to feel pain in its many guises. This breathing in is done for yourself, in the sense that it's a personal and real experience, but simultaneously there's no doubt that you're at the same time developing your kinship with all beings. If you can know it in yourself, you can know it in everyone."

Taking this dark energy in does not mean staying in that space. The next step in the practice involves breathing out relief — a feeling of delight, inspiration, relaxation, spaciousness. She continues, "Breathing out is like ventilating the whole thing, airing it out. Breathing out is like opening up your arms and just letting go. It's fresh air." You begin by seeking to relieve a specific situation of suffering, your own or another's. Then you extend that relief to all others in the same situation.

To practice this when you are online, notice specific instances of painful or undesirable events and difficult emotions. Breathe them in. Then breathe out qualities that change or relieve that suffering. Start with a specific instance: a child without health care because of decisions by legislators. Then universalize it: all children without health care. By breathing in the dark (the child's suffering) and breathing out the light (envisioning the child with access to healing), you can transform the negative into something positive. Then you can offer it back to the world, even to the world wide web, in a healing capacity.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America’s democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we’ve suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

| To uphold the democratic values of: | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Common good | Freedom Independence Liberty | <i>E Pluribus Unum,</i> “Out of many — one” | Equality Justice for all Rule of law | Patriotism Popular sovereignty |
| And to cultivate the democratic virtues of: | | | | |
| Appreciation | Courage | Adaptability | Accountability | Assertiveness |
| Caring | Determination | Cooperation | Awareness | Consideration |
| Commitment | Honesty | Embracing diversity | Dignity | Cultivating wisdom |
| Creativity | Humility | Integrity | Fairness | Discernment |
| Empathy | Nobility | Mercy | Honor | Idealism |
| Generosity | Open- mindedness | Optimism | Initiative | Loyalty |
| Moderation | Purposefulness | Peacefulness | Love of learning | Responsibility, especially for civic engagement |
| Pursuit of excellence | Sacrifice | Searching for transcendence | Perseverance | Social conscience |
| Service | Self-discipline | Sincerity | Resilience | |
| Simplicity | Self-reliance | | Respect | |
| Thankfulness | Trustworthiness | | Steadfastness | |
| | Truthfulness | | Strength | |
| We need spiritual practices of: | | | | |
| Compassion | Joy | Connections | Forgiveness | Devotion |
| Gratitude | Openness | Love | Justice | Faith |
| Hope | Questing | Peace | Reverence | Listening |
| Hospitality | Transformation | Teachers | You | Meaning |
| Imagination | Yearning | Unity | Vision | Shadow |
| Kindness | | | | |

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.



Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/program-plans
3. For more on **civility**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/24/civility
4. For more on **conversations**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations
5. For more on **loving enemies**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/30/enemies
6. For more on **openness**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/24/openness



A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

This Practicing Democracy Guide is copyright ©2019 by Spirituality & Practice (SpiritualityandPractice.com), a multifaith website presenting resources for spiritual journeys as part of the Practicing Democracy Project. The guide was researched and written by Kristin Ritzau, a 2018 Practicing Democracy Fellow. Democratic values, virtues, and spiritual practices chart researched and created by Habib Todd Boerger.

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For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

