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SUBTLE ACTIVISM: APPLYING SPIRITUAL POWER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Social change activists shouldn't rule out spiritual effects that science doesn't have a hold on, argues David Nicol.

Editor's note: Tikkun holds no brief for the idea that science can quantify the "subtle" (as opposed to physical, psychological or social) ways that prayer or meditation might "work" (i.e. work for what we believe are good purposes). And David Nicol agrees, in a separate email, that God is not to be constrained in this way. If we don't agree with everything here, that is normal for this website. The alliance of spiritual progressives is wide and deep.

Subtle Activism: Applying Spiritual Power for Social Change

by David Nicol

On March 15, 2002, over 600,000 Sri Lankans traveled from all corners of the country to the sacred city of Anuradhapura to participate in the world's largest ever peace meditation. After a few brief spoken prayers by members of the clergy of various Sri Lankan religions, event organizer Dr. Ariyaratne guided the massive crowd into a simple mindful breathing meditation. Over half a million people settled into deep stillness and silence for an entire hour. The meditation was clearly a political statement, yet there were no placards or speeches – simply silence. Dr. Ariyaratne, who since 1958 had worked on refugee and rehabilitation projects with both sides of Sri Lanka's bitter civil war, introduced the peace meditations in the late 1990's in order to "change the psycho-sphere." The American peace activist Joanna Macy, present at the March 15 meditation, called it "the biggest silence I ever heard.... I thought: This is the sound of bombs and landmines not exploding, of rockets not launched, of machine guns laid aside. This is possible."

It is not hard to find other examples of the use of collective contemplative practice (e.g., prayer, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines) to unite people around political objectives or for social harmony. During the Battle of Britain, Londoners of various faiths united daily for a minute of silence after the chiming of Big Ben at 9pm – a practice intended to strengthen the moral resolve of the city's inhabitants during the ordeal of war. In recent years, the expansion of the global interfaith movement and the emergence of the Internet have given rise to numerous globally synchronized meditation and prayer vigils that link individuals and communities around the world for shared silence and prayers for peace. For example, in early 2003 during the buildup to the Iraq war, the Global Interfaith Prayer Vigil brought together over 100,000 monks, nuns and other committed practitioners of a wide variety of faiths for a fifteen-week vigil to pray for a peaceful solution.

These examples highlight an unconventional approach to social and political change that can be seen as a kind of subtle activism, which seeks to indirectly affect events in the social and political realm through exerting a non-local influence on the collective mindset of a community, nation, or even the whole human species. (By "non-local" I mean effects of prayer or thought at a distance that are generally called "psi" or "miraculous" because we don't yet have a scientific way of understanding them). Subtle activism grows from the idea that there are many ways to positively influence social change other than overt political action. Traditional methods of front-line activism (e.g., marches, demonstrations, putting one's body in front of bulldozers, etc) represent only the most immediate and direct expressions of action for social change. As Sean Kelly points out in his essay "The Hidden Face of Wisdom: Toward an Awakened Activism," it is possible to identify a spectrum of social action that proceeds from the more obvious, or overt forms down a graded scale of increasing subtlety. For example, certain kinds of intellectual activity (e.g., paradigm-shifting breakthroughs) and artistic expressions (e.g., socially-conscious films, music and literature) influence social change more indirectly, or more subtly, than conventional forms of political action, by altering the intellectual or social context in which decisions are made. At the subtlest level, even certain activities of consciousness or spirit can be recognized as forms of social action. Here I am referring to those activities of spirit or consciousness specifically

intended to support collective healing and social transformation, such as a global meditation for world peace or a ritual to protect a forest. Since I want to highlight the spiritual dimension of activism, I limit my definition of subtle activism to this, most subtle (and most mysterious) end of the spectrum.

“Activities of spirit” in this context could mean meditation, prayer, ritual, chanting, or any other kind of practice from any tradition. But note that a spiritual practice is only subtle activism if it is oriented primarily for the benefit of the collective public realm, rather than for the benefit of an individual (or a small group of personal friends or relatives). Thus meditating for one’s own enlightenment would not be considered subtle activism, but meditating for peace on Earth would be. Praying for the health of one’s friend is not subtle activism, but praying for a community struck by natural disaster probably is.

From a conventional modern perspective, of course, the idea that meditation and prayer could have anything to do with social change is nonsensical. However, in recent decades, a host of researchers in various fields of consciousness studies have called for a radical re-evaluation of the nature and role of consciousness (see, e.g., Stanislav Grof, Dean Radin, Daniel Benor, Larry Dossey, Arnold Mindell, Rupert Sheldrake, among many others). They have argued that the modern materialistic assumption that consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of biological processes located within individual human brains cannot explain the empirical evidence that many believe has been convincingly established in a variety of disciplines for the existence of various kinds of non-local phenomena. (See, for example, Radin and Sheldrake on evidence of non-local transmissions of information between people in parapsychology research, Benor and Dossey on evidence of non-local healing effects in distant healing research, and Grof on evidence of non-local access to obscure cultural and personal information from research into non-ordinary states of consciousness.) Further evidence of non-local consciousness effects (with special relevance for the hypothesis of subtle activism) can be found in the results of the Global Consciousness Project (in which significant correlations have been demonstrated between events that capture the world’s attention and non-random activity in a global network of random number generators) and the empirical research into the so-called “Maharishi Effect” (in which 23 studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals show highly significant correlations between the practice of TM meditation by large groups and improvements in social indicators like crime rates). To better explain this evidence, a new vision is taking shape in which consciousness is generally understood as a non-local field in which humans are embedded. Such a view is also reflected in the articulation by many contemporary philosophical and spiritual thinkers of an integral participatory paradigm that challenges the modern assumption that we live in a universe that possesses no intrinsic meaning or purpose and instead suggests that we are co-creative participants embedded in a larger intelligent matrix (see, e.g., Richard Tarnas in *Psyche and Cosmos* on the “re-enchantment of the cosmos” and Jorge Ferrer’s in *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* on spiritual experiences as “multi-local participatory events” that can occur not only within individuals but also in relationships and communities). In this light, subtle activism can be seen as entirely consistent with an emerging perspective that understands consciousness as playing a much more central role in the universe than previously assumed.

An integral approach to social change

Subtle activism is clearly coherent with spiritual activism (as that term is usually understood) in that both seek to build a bridge between the inner world of spiritual practice and the outer world of social and political affairs. However, as Kelly notes, in the common view of spiritual activism, spirituality is of course valued but primarily insofar as it may help to lead people into the work of social change or to inform or sustain those already so engaged. As Kelly rightly points out, the tacit assumption in this perspective is that spirituality is not, therefore, in and of itself a form of action in the social realm, a view that arguably perpetuates the modern split between spirit and matter and reinforces the marginalization of consciousness. In the enlarged view of activism or social engagement I am proposing, the range of possibilities open to today’s activist is expanded to include the subtle activity of consciousness itself as a legitimate option.

It is important to acknowledge here that a potential pitfall of subtle activism is that it could be used by some as a spiritual rationalization for remaining disengaged from worldly affairs -- a kind of social spiritual bypassing. However such an attitude would represent a narcissistic distortion of my proposal, which seeks to ground subtle activism in the world by linking it with more conventional forms of activism as part of a holistic approach to social change. I am not suggesting, for example, that subtle activism on its own is sufficient to solve the world’s problems (any more than a meditation practice on its own is sufficient to solve all of our personal problems). Direct action will always be needed and can itself be seen, in the right context, as a sacred calling. However for many people of a certain temperament, or who possess certain spiritual gifts, subtle activism might represent the most effective means at their disposal to make a meaningful contribution toward social change.

A typology of subtle activism

A simple typology of subtle activism can be developed by making an analogy with individual spiritual development. In most approaches to individual spiritual growth, it is possible to identify two broad dimensions of inner work. The first involves making contact with our deeper nature by stilling the more superficial layers of our personality through meditation, prayer, ritual, or other kind of contemplative practice. The second involves working through the limiting beliefs and behavioral patterns we have inherited from our personal history. This dimension of inner work usually involves making conscious the unconscious sources of our limiting beliefs and patterns through examining crucial aspects of our personal history.

We can similarly identify two corresponding dimensions of subtle activism, as a spiritual approach to collective transformation. The first is essentially the same as for individual spiritual growth -- making contact with our deeper nature through contemplative practice as, for example, when we, while alone, meditate or pray for world peace. Importantly, however, subtle activism may also involve making contact with our deeper collective nature, as, for example, when we co-create a field of consciousness through participating in collective contemplative practice, such as a global meditation and prayer event, or a group ritual. Indeed, the kinds of subtle activism that arguably hold the most promise for our moment are forms of collective spiritual practice, which is why I consider global meditation and prayer the paradigmatic expression of this first dimension of subtle activism.

The second dimension of subtle activism involves practices that bring to consciousness the wounds and limiting beliefs we have inherited from our collective history -- the scars of racism, sexism, anthropocentrism, of war and genocide, of imperialism and cultural destruction. This category includes the approach of Christopher M. Bache, a Professor of Religious Studies at Youngstown State University, who describes in *Dark Night, Early Dawn* his process of consciously engaging the previously unresolved pain of collective trauma through intense inner experiential work catalyzed by entheogenic substances. Bache proposes that, at very deep levels of self-exploration, one moves beyond personal biographic material to encounter dynamics operating in the collective unconscious (or "species mind") and that the transformational work of an individual who penetrates to this level can have a therapeutic effect on the whole human species.

This dimension of subtle activism also includes a growing number of group approaches that provide forums for heartfelt dialogue (and sometimes other methods of emotional release work) specifically designed to process aspects of our collective shadow. Leading examples include Will Keepin's Gender Reconciliation work (in which women and men come together in sacred space to heal gender injustice) and Joanna Macy's "The Work that Reconnects" (in which people are provided a space to access and express their deeper feelings about the present condition of the planet).

WiseUSA 2008: Honoring the Heart and Soul of America

WiseUSA 2008 is an example of a global subtle activism event intended to bring the world together in meditation and prayer before, during and after the critical US elections in November 2008. The core intention of the event is expressed in the following prayer:

"We the people, the ancestors of our great, great grandchildren,
call forth the deepest wisdom and highest compassion from the heart and soul of America,
for the benefit of the entire Earth community and the next seven generations.
May Wisdom Prevail in the USA.
May Peace Prevail on Earth."

From Saturday October 25 to Thursday November 6, hundreds of thousands of people from diverse cultures and religions around the world will focus on this shared intention in several teleconferences and in their regular daily practice. On Sunday November 2, a Global Ceremony will link gatherings in major US cities by videoconference for a powerful two-hour ritual involving contemplative music, silent meditation, spoken prayers, and celebration. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people will join in online through listening to a live audio broadcast of the ceremony, and/or with the aid of other contemplative media resources. For more information about WiseUSA 2008, see <http://www.wiseusa.net>.

Conclusion

With the increasing sophistication of the Internet and the (associated) emergence of a planetary consciousness, subtle forms of activism like WiseUSA 2008 are becoming more and more popular (see, e.g., the Gaiafield Project, www.gaiafield.net). It is as though a common dream is arising from within the heart of humanity -- to experience the beauty of our planetary togetherness. The French paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin had the same dream over seventy years ago, predicting

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an evolutionary leap to a new planetary “organicosocial supercomplex,” fuelled by the attraction of humans toward the emerging possibility of global unity consciousness. Global meditation and prayer events, especially those incorporating new Internet audio-visual technologies, give participants an immediate and emotionally moving experience of this emerging reality. In this light, we can speculate that global meditation events may be planting the seeds of a new consciousness deep into the dark, moist soil of the collective psyche. In that very quiet, very still place, the birth of something genuinely original in collective consciousness might be possible. While the potential of this practice has scarcely been tapped, I contend that subtle forms of activism like global meditation and prayer, especially when integrated with more conventional forms of activism, can play a crucial unifying role in any holistic approach to collective healing and social change.

David Nicol is the Director of the Gaiafield Center for Subtle Activism at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. The Gaiafield Center is an action research center recently launched to advance the study and practice of subtle activism and is the home of the Gaiafield Project (www.gaiafield.net), a sustainable program of subtle activism events and projects developed collaboratively by leaders in the field. David is currently writing his PhD dissertation at the California Institute of Integral Studies on the topic of subtle activism. He can be contacted at dnicol@ciis.edu.

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