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## From Without to Within: Inner Transformation as a Pedagogy for Social Activism

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### **From Without to Within: Inner Transformation as a Pedagogy for Social Activism**

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#### **Abstract**

#### **Keywords**

Social activism;  
Spirituality;  
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Nature;  
Yogic sciences

Change has become the urgency of our time, as the harrowing Anthropocene and ongoing socio-political crises are challenging the future of humanity and our planet. While systemic structural forces are often (and rightfully so) the target to blame, social activism is as much about our own path of inner change as it is about attempting to create a better world externally. This aspect of social activism can easily become misunderstood as inertia, while more traditional forms of resistance aimed at subverting macro-structures are favored. In this essay, I draw from literature on spirituality and consciousness, new biology, quantum sciences, as well as nature studies and education, to shed light on a new form of social activism that calls for each person to recognize our role in co-creating the world, and emphasizes spiritual awakening as the most vital feature of human flourishing. Social change in the external domain will not last unless we have done the inner work to weed out misconceptions, biases, and wrong thinking that led us to contemporary crises in the first place. The essay discussed the elevation of human consciousness through the aid of nature and yogic sciences as the need of the hour, and as the most crucial aspects of social activism in the new era.

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Yesterday I was clever. That is why I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise.  
That is why I am changing myself.

—Sri Chinmoy (1989, p. 206)

### Change and the Urgency of Our Time

Change has become the urgency of our time, as climate crisis, species extinction, warfare, racial divide, economic polarization, pandemics, and mental disorders are filling every sound bite of our contemporary life. No matter who and where we are, we are all inextricably affected by the whirlpool of challenges facing humanity today. While systemic structural forces are often (and rightfully so) held responsible for the challenges we face, we cannot solve the problems of the system without changing people and their consciousness that created and continues to perpetuate the dynamics of the problems. The consciousness that fuelled capitalist growth at the expense of Nature and other beings cannot eliminate global poverty or reverse ecological degradation by means of amassing more material abundance; it will only lead to greater environmental destruction and social exploitation. As Barker (2002) somberly puts, “capitalism has continually transformed itself to the point that we no longer have a viable alternative to it” (p. 175). In other words, there are no easily identifiable solutions, because knowing the heinous role of mass consumerism in the present environmental predicament does not automatically translate into retraining one’s impulses and living the right way. It also means that fixating on structural and material dimensions of our existence is an insufficient approach to social change and activism, as the harrowing Anthropocene is precisely produced by throw-away, fast-paced, anthropocentric materialist culture. To change the planetary future, *every* human being must be compelled to examine and transform our very mode of living and being.

In this way, social activism is as much about our own path of inner change as it is about attempting to create a better world externally; the two are both sides of the same coin. It is a hallmark of wisdom when we start to change the world by changing ourselves, because the world is but a mirror of our consciousness. Therefore, we must resist the chaos of the time by molding our living not from outside but from within. This aspect of social activism can easily become neglected or misunderstood as inertia, while more traditional forms of resistance aimed at subverting macro-structures and undermining power are favored. In a recent article (Wu, 2023) published in the edited volume *The Right to Resist: Philosophies of Dissent*, I explore resistance through the lens of self-transformation, which fundamentally departs from the traditional forms of civil disobedience or subversion targeted at institutions and macro-structures. I reflect on spiritual practices, such as contemplation and meditation, as a pedagogy of unlearning and becoming, and discuss how resistance, viewed in light of the radical re-mapping of subjectivity, shifts our attention from altering outside circumstances to the subject’s own transformation by which to experience the world anew.

The role of spirituality in the ongoing (re)construction of the world is a fascinating topic; and in our crises-filled contemporary world, it is also timely and urgent. Beyond dogmatic rituals and religious beliefs, spirituality is about inner work, about elevating consciousness, and about creating new dimensions of experience through the subject’s own transformation. Intellect and cognition can only get us so far. We have known the problem of planet pollution and the short-sightedness of modern culture for a long time. We have been warned by Rachel

Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* more than six decades ago; yet knowledge alone has not prevented us from indulging in the quickening pace of self and planet sabotaging. As the vast majority of us are too overstretched in our professional and personal lives, we often relegate the inner work to the realm of self-care that we can only afford to do when we have time (i.e., retired, on vacation, etc.). While we are busy achieving external goals, we forget about the most vital aspect of human flourishing, that of spiritual awakening, of turning inward for balance, simplicity, and harmony, without which the world outside can only be chaos. Social change in the external domain will not last unless we have done the inner work to weed out misconceptions, biases, and wrong thinking that habitually engage us in inappropriate and limiting behaviors.

### Consciousness, Universe, Change

If the shift to a new level of consciousness is indeed the need of the hour, what then is consciousness? What is its role in our existence and evolution? In 2005, a leading scientific journal *Nature* published a fascinating essay titled "The Mental Universe" by physicist Richard Conn Henry from Johns Hopkins University. In it, Henry discusses the quantum mechanical nature of the world in which the duality of energy and mass is undone by the simple truth that everything is energy. Henry (2015) makes a remarkable point that "[t]he Universe is immaterial – mental and spiritual" and invites us to "abandon our tendency to conceptualize observations as things" in order to see the Universe as is (p. 26). The physicist's insight that consciousness is the fundamental aspect of the physical world not only turns conventional wisdom upside down but also puts the creation of our external reality squarely in our own hands. It reveals the interactions between the mind and the world that we can no longer ignore. We need not look far to understand how our competitive, consumptive, and exploitative mindset has led to the onslaughts of crises of our world. If the Universe is indeed conscious and spiritual, it is a clarion call for each person to recognize our role in co-creating the world, to perceive the planet as one interconnected living organism such that when human consciousness awakens, a different quality of Earth consciousness will be born. It is also a clarion call for us to elevate our consciousness by modifying our beliefs and behavioral tendencies towards a noble lifestyle – one in which we take only what we need, live in consciousness of abundance, love, and truthfulness, and measure success from inside out and not from outside in.

The characteristics of consciousness has been profoundly studied by Bruce Lipton (2015) in *Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles* in which he explores how the mind and its responses to the environmental signals propel our lives and co-create individual and planetary destinies. While Western biomedicine has successfully constructed the myth of mind and body split based on a Newtonian physical universe, new biology and quantum physics have revealed mind and body, energy and matter as integrally bound. As Lipton (2015) argues, "proper use of consciousness can bring health to an ailing body, [while] inappropriate unconscious control of emotions can easily make a healthy body diseased" (pp. 126-127). Debunking the dogma that genes control biology, Lipton (2015) unravels, through his profound research on cells, the power of our minds: "our perceptions, whether they are accurate or inaccurate, equally impact our behavior and our bodies" (p. 131); and more importantly, "what we do alters the environment. We change the environment simply by being there" (p. 211). In quantum science, the phenomenon of entanglement at the subatomic level has revealed connections between particles across vast distances. This allows information to be transmitted in a way beyond what we understand in the classical Newtonian world. Seen from the quantum lenses, what we do and think reverberates and creates ripple effect in the

environment. We all understand this intuitively: we often feel a pious impact when we enter a temple or meditation hall because of the state of mind and consciousness of many patrons which left a particular vibration in the atmosphere. Similarly, we tend to feel a state of disequilibrium when we visit hospitals or mental health institutions. If consciousness acts like filters through which we perceive and act upon the world, then it holds the key to individual growth and planetary renewal, indeed a biological mandate for a healthy, balanced existence. In Lipton's words (2015), the survival of the most loving, rather than the Darwinian "survival of the fittest," is an evolutionary mandate.

Spiritual guide of the Heartfulness Meditation, Kamlesh D. Patel, known by many as Daaji, similarly describes consciousness as "the basic canvas of the manifested universe" (2020, p. 61). To alter our manifested universe, therefore, we must alter the canvas – our subconscious mind which is the primary architect of our life experiences. To do so, we need to tap into the subjective realm which carries more power than our objective situation. The tapping into and rewriting of the subjective realm for human evolution is social activism par excellence. As Lipton (2015) reminds us, the subconscious mind, which was rapidly downloaded from the environment during early childhood, determines about 95 percent of our behaviors and perceptions in life. Therefore, inner transformation as social activism must start with the subconscious mind, which unfortunately can hardly be affected by intellectual pursuit of knowledge. In the following sections, let us take a look at how Nature and yogic science help to bring about inner change.

### **Nature as Catalyst of Inner Change**

Nature awakens us, nurtures us, and connects us to our spiritual essence and the mystical of life. Recall a glowing mountain top, the undulating blue of bounteous ocean, and luscious sunrise clouds; remember how they enthrall, restore, and uplift us. This is because humans and the Earth evolved together for millennia, and the connection between beings on Earth is primordial. While indigenous cultures invariably regard the love for Nature as the ultimate spirituality of daily living, the lack of reverence for the Earth is often associated with the consciousness of control and profit that forms the bedrock of modern sciences. As Aline Wolf (2017), author of Maria Montessori's philosophy, writes, the sacrilege of Nature stems from our failure to see the natural world as conveying a spiritual presence, nor see the care of the Earth as a spiritual way of life.

Photographs from outer space demonstrate the unique, but also precarious, position of our planet – unique because no other sphere in our solar system has the same life-sustaining condition as we know it; precarious because we are endangering the only home we have by overconsumption, deforestation, and pollution. Aldo Leopold (1949), an American naturalist, urged for a land ethic to ensure the survival of planet Earth more than seven decades ago: "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land... A land ethic ... affirms their right to existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state" (p. 204). An important part of the land ethic is to cultivate the capacity to love and revere life in all forms, because the living Earth is an embodiment and celebration of love. This love and reverence, overlooked in our modern-day life and schooling, holds the key to lifting the veils that separate the many inhabitants of Earth, the key to divine oneness that makes the Earth come alive as a magical, sacred, and spiritual being.

To move from forgetfulness to "remembering," this state of what Zen Buddhist Thich

Nhat Hanh (1987) calls “interbeing,” is social activism – a new form of social activism that is a pressing need today as our world spins more and more out of balance. The intricately connected web of life on the planet has been long forgotten by our culture, so this form of social activism requires nothing less than changing our very belief system. It is about breaking down existing habits and patterns of our making, so that we can be realigned with Nature’s principles of oneness, simplicity, and purity.

Sciences have strongly supported that plants are also conscious beings that communicate, learn, and feel; thus, the dividing lines between animals, plants, and humans are increasingly questioned (Wohlleben, 2016). One of the silver linings of the COVID pandemic for our family is that I began to frequent the trails right across from our house with my three-year-old son. Our delightful ritual of tree hugging has made the woods and the trails very special. “Mom, you hug the big tree, and I hug the small one,” my toddler rejoices at his bond with Nature while I am renewed with a sense of awe. During the few minutes of arms encircling the tree, what is transmitted is not knowledge, but a nurturing of the spirit and wonder wherein lies the possibility of self-transcendence and connection to all beings. Tree hugging as an impactful pedagogy produces an indescribable field of inter-change; a cool and subtle vibration runs through the body, magically washing away tiredness and worries. Time slows down; mind slows down; stillness. In deep gratitude, we remember what it feels like to be in touch, in love with the natural world. We are part of the whole. Contrary to the anthropocentric notion of the natural landscape as a blank slate passively harnessed by humans, trees assert their own claims and ontological significance. In such moment, Peter Kahn (2020) reminds us, we gain ecological presence through direct interaction with nature, and “those perceptions can then settle into a mind’s awareness without conscious mind activity” (p. 32). This presence, through the restorative immersion in and felt embodiment of Nature, helps recalibrate the redundant (even destructive) thinking of our minds, and returns us to the core of our being. In yogic literature, trees are said to be capable of retaining transmission (a subtle life force) and creating their microclimate much better than humans can. This realization gives us hope that we can perhaps stop climate change with the help of Nature, by letting Nature come back, not just outside us, but also within us. Nature as the catalyst of inner change beckons us to embrace the new era of social activism.

### **Wisdom from the Yogic Science**

Indeed, the key is to let nature come back, not just outside us, but also within us. Spiritual practices such as meditation lead us towards the higher nature of the self, by reprogramming behaviors, refining emotional temperament, and moving from fear and judgment to love and compassion. In yogic science, this is called the removal of complexities that cause human suffering, which is about cleaning of the subconscious mind (Denley, 2020). The process of removing the roots of all tendencies that lie dormant in the subconscious and recalibrating ourselves towards a simple, ennobling lifestyle is essential to bringing about change. According to yogic science, consciousness is in everything, from the mineral kingdom to the human world, even in atoms. Different types of organisms are all vibrational beings with varying levels of consciousness. Meditation allows us to see the nature around us with new eyes. The wonderful experience of tree hugging is akin to my daily meditation, when attention is turned inward and mind’s conceptual chatters slow down so as to allow a different kind of voice to emerge.

I stumbled upon a form of meditation called Heartfulness in 2015 when I was experiencing a rather stressful period in my professional life. As an early career scholar, I dappled in the

demanding academic culture of “publish or perish” with anxiety. While I had always felt a constant draw inside to seek something larger than life since an early age, up to that point, I had not systematically engaged in any spiritual practice. I then came across a campus meditation workshop, which became a turning point in my personal transformation. The initial meditations with my trainers began to tune my awareness to the vibrations of the heart, wherein lies the oneness of all hearts. I became a regular in the campus Heartfulness community, and developed an earnest interest in the rapidly unfolding inner dimension. Every time I went for a sitting or group meditation, I felt recharged and a load of burden removed from my system. Little by little, one meditation after another, I found myself entering lighter and lighter states of being. I noticed more and more of a meditative state, even while I was not meditating, and the world (including people, plants, and inanimate objects) became gentler, friendlier, and brighter.

Through the teachings of Heartfulness, I learned the profound tools of recalibrating consciousness through heart-based meditation and cleaning. The cleaning technique aided by *pranahuti* (transmission) helps to remove mental impressions and emotional complexities accumulated in our day-to-day life, and results in greater simplicity and purity. If untreated, these complexities become hardened behavioral tendencies (habits) and take on a life of their own, becoming the limited (even distorted) looking glass through which we perceive the world. Cleaning is a pedagogy of unlearning par excellence; but unlike classroom pedagogies, it can only be learned through actual experience. We are all familiar with the concept of clean energy that does not pollute the environment in the form of biohazards or carbon footprints. But we seldom talk about the need to purify consciousness in the energetic human system. Yogic science, of which meditation is an essential part, allows us to re-tune the vibration of our subtle body by re-programming fixed subconscious patterns, so we can be “remade” in Nature’s way. The ultimate aim of yoga is “union,” the yoking of man’s mind and worldly activities to higher Truth or Reality (Deshpande, 2021/1978). Thus, yoga is defined as the path that leads one to the highest human potential through the uniting of one’s body, mind, and soul, and the integration of one’s material existence with spiritual realization. Now as a Heartfulness trainer since 2016, I am humbled to be able to share this beautiful art of inner transformation with others.

As the Chinese word for “crisis” (危机)—literally “danger and opportunity” — implies, the current global predicaments necessitate and precipitate change and evolution. And, hopefully, a new form of social activism will be the outcome of this crisis — the opportunity to integrate spirituality into the change process so we can elevate our consciousness as a species. Unlike modern schooling founded on competitive ethos and the rational mind, a new pedagogy for social activism must equip the learners with the wisdom and wonder to realize one’s truest potential and transform humanity. This form of social activism is not about political upheavals, but about changes at the individual level, one heart at a time, towards a future of true, lasting well-being for all inhabitants of the Earth.

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