Yoga and Activism: Are You Ready to Occupy the World from Within?

Ramesh Bjonnes challenges the notion that a yogi or mystic is someone who is only concerned with individual personal development, and puts forward the concept of a socially engaged spirituality, the yoga of sacred activism.

{mosgoogle}“A mysticism that is only private and self-absorbed leaves the evils of the world intact and does little to halt the suicidal juggernaut of history; an activism that is not purified by profound spiritual and psychological self-awareness and rooted in divine truth, wisdom, and compassion will only perpetuate the problem it is trying to solve, whatever it’s righteous intentions.” –Andrew Harvey

Enlightenment, in other words, is not an escape from the world but a true return to the world.

In the words of sages and pundits from various wisdom traditions and backgrounds, we see a common, golden thread: enlightenment is being in this world but not of it. Enlightenment is having your head and heart in the wide open sky of spirit and your feet firmly planted in the garden of life.

In other words, Enlightenment means transformation, transforming us and the world at the same time. Enlightenment means to be an integral person working towards creating an integral world. Enlightenment means being a spiritual activist.

So what do the great wisdom traditions say that urges us to be active in this world? From Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, we learn:

“Brahma (Cosmic Consciousness) is the world.”

“Nirvana and Samsara are not two.”

“Shiva (Cosmic Consciousness) and Shakti (Cosmic Energy) are one.”

“Brahma is the composite of Shiva and Shakti.”

In other words, the nondual philosophies of Tantric Yoga, for example, teaches us about inner and outer ecology; that the world of spirit (Shiva) and the world of matter (Shakti) are essentially an integrated whole; are One in Brahma.

In the words of Ken Wilber: “The point, we might say, is that the circle of Ascending and Descending energies must always be unbroken: “this world” and the “other world” united in one ongoing, everlasting, exuberant embrace.”

In the words of my tantric guru, Anandamurti: “Yoga means unification…We must have yoga in all the three levels of life. If there is yoga only in the spiritual level and there is no yoga in the psychic and physical level, what will happen? The very existence of human beings will become unbalanced, human equipoise will be lost. So we must have yoga, or rather yoga-oriented movement, in each and every sphere of life.”

But not all yoga philosophies have urged the same balance; not all yogis have lived firmly rooted in this world. In Vedanta we are taught that this world is an illusion. Consequently some yogis have fled this world to seek salvation in spirit only.

There are always exceptions. Even though Vivekananda was a follower of Vedanta and did not think posture yoga (asanas) was very important, he was a political activist in his native India.

Still, I favor those who clearly favor balance in their world view. “Yoga in each and every sphere of life.” That is, when we buy yogurt a yogi is to consider not only how deliciously it melts on the tongue and how good it is for health but also how good it is for the planet’s health—how and where it was grown by farmers, animals and dirt. That is yogic ecology.

Yoga is then to ask ourselves: Is this yogurt both organic and local? If not, is it better to buy this local yogurt even though it is not organic, like that popular brand over there, which is produced 2000 miles away? These are questions on the yogi/activist’s mind; these are questions every earth-yogi must make and answer. And, yes, these are questions without clear cut and easy answers.

Because, if all is one, the way my food is made and where it comes from, it matters. Because, if all is one, the less suffering I cause animals and the environment, it matters.

If all is one, as yoga says, it all matters. Not just my personal body and soul, but also the body and soul of others, the body and soul of animals, of plants. The body and soul of those people living over there.

But let’s not climb too high up on the ecological or activist pedestal. I have Appalachian Hillbilly neighbors who eat

bears and have never heard the word asanas. They grow most of their own food and generally live lives much greener than I do, even though I try to shop local and organic and grow some veggies and live in a so-called green community.

To be a yogi activist, then, is to look the world straight in its face and answer all the uneasy questions in life and come up with workable, conscious compromises. Because, here on this dusty earth, perfection, like the sexy perfection in that sleek, sensual body of the Lululemon yogi, that kind of perfection is not the perfection the yogi activist will always find or even want.

Yogi perfection is, first of all, a state of mind, a state of heart, a state of consciousness; then that state of mind urges us into imperfect action. Imperfect action in the world of Shakti, the world of Samsara.

Still, we act by thinking, by feeling, that this world is also Brahma, also consciousness, also sacred. In Tantra that is acting from the state of madhuvidya, from the heart of honey knowledge. We act as if the world is a sweet and sacred place to live. Always.

If all is potentially sweet, if all is potentially one, how our economy runs, how our resources are shared, it matters. It can be part of our yoga, our enlightenment enterprise to Occupy Wall Street. We can do yoga by occupying space on the sidewalk to protest the firing of workers. It can be yoga to say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH to the CEO and the board of directors, who, like heroin addicts, stole the wages of these workers to increase their quarterly profit fix. Not to demonstrate because it is hip, but simply because it matters.

It can be yoga to say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH without hating those you say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH to.

In some of my retreats, I teach a meditation and visualization exercise developed by spiritual activist Andrew Harvey in which the aim is to break our hearts open to the world, to passionately find that heartbroken space within which resonates with that which is broken outside us.

Because that which is broken can heal, and that act of healing is yoga, that act of healing is spiritual activism. That act is part of the idea that Samsara and Nirvana are One, the idea that Shiva and Shakti are one in Brahma. The idea that what is Above is also Below.

That is Tantra, that is yoga. That is what the yogic transformation enterprise is all about: to blend that which is within us with that which is outside us. That is the sacred and often complex and neglected enterprise of yoga.

Yoga can mend ligaments, backs, hearts—and yoga can, in small and big ways, mend the world.

My guru, Anandamurti, had a saying: yoga is self-realization and service to the world. Living according to that saying landed him in jail, and he became the Nelson Mandela of yoga.

Because, if yoga is all about navel watching and retreating from this world, then what kind of yoga is it? The yoga of a selfish, lonely, separated soul in the body of a sexy Lululemon ad? The yoga of a body-denying ascetic whose nails are too long to feed himself?

It is no accident that religious enterprises which are about going-to-heaven-only and yogic enterprises which are for-myself-only have a one-dimensional resemblance to economists who define human behavior and aspirations in purely economic terms.

The economic human sees greed as good; that selfish aspirations are solely what an economy is built upon. And that fictionalized version of reality has created a fictionalized, phantom economy based on greed and speculation.

Likewise, the ego-driven yogi mistakes the beautiful body in the mirror for the beautiful self within.

And the ascetic thinks that by denying the body it will eventually evaporate into the transparent purity of soul.

Body-obsession and profit-obsession and ascetic-escaping-the-world-obsession thus share similar traits: they have great difficulty embracing reality in its wholeness, in its imperfect, complex yet sacred earthiness.

If yoga is holistic, which I believe it is, then part of its holism lies in its ability to embrace opposites and see the oneness in diversity and complexity. Yoga thus is not only about occupying the mat, the cushion and Wall Street, but about occupying the whole of reality, the whole of life in all its divine, imperfect and vast sacredness—in each and every moment of our lives.

That, and nothing less, is the yoga of imperfect perfection, the yoga of enlightenment with both a small and capital E. That is the yoga of sacred activism.

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