

## **Internal Stillness in the Age of Constant Movement**

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### *Abstract*

This paper argues for the importance of cultivating the ability to stop and internally yield, particularly at this time in history when we are, in the words of theologian Boff, at a point of socio-ecological crisis. We are ideologically polarized as humans; meanwhile, we are increasingly aware of how destructive human behavior has been for the world's poor, for the Earth's ecosystems, for the Earth itself. There is a desire for peace amid torrents of real and fabricated information coming from social media sites, the internet and television. Never has it been more difficult to stop. Yet, if we can learn to stop internally, I argue that we will become capable of insight and imagination that would otherwise be unavailable to us. Through a contemplative posture of 'awaiting,' we will become not only better grounded in reality, but we will be better capable of addressing the socio-ecological crisis we face today.

*Keywords:* Silence, Mental and Emotional Landscapes.

### **Introduction**

A quote from *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* by spiritual teacher Hanh (2015) goes as follows:

There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, “where are you going?” and the first man replies, “I don’t know! Ask the horse!” This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don’t know where we are going, and we can’t stop. The horse is our habit of energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others (Hanh, 2015, p. 24).

I have been reflecting on the need to stop a lot lately. I teach at a small college in Wisconsin, USA, and I notice that my students are increasingly anxious and depressed. I begin all my classes, but especially my class on spirituality, with silent meditation, and several students have told me that this is the only moment of quiet they get in the day. They run from classes and homework (some for which I’m to blame!), to work, socializing, and especially, spending time on their phones and other devices. They feel guilty when they stop to meditate, but ironically, they don’t seem to feel too guilty when they spend hours on social media or shopping or binging on Netflix. And even as I talk about stopping and stillness all the time, a part of me relates to their need to run constantly, to produce, and to keep active. There is a strong cultural habitual energy to keep going no matter the cost, but as anxiety increases and the problems of the world become more palpable, a more reflective life – a contemplative yielding – becomes necessary.

This yielding is principally an internal state of openness, as the posture of awaiting for the answer to a question one has posed with full and open curiosity. This awaiting certainly requires periodic physical stillness, but more than anything it requires a mental stillness, an internal posture of vacancy, of being ready to take in what is given. It is no coincidence that many of the world’s great activists and social movers have been capable of this awaiting. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly spoke of his kitchen table experience, wherein a moment of despair he heard a voice saying “[s]tand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever” (Washington, 1986, p. 509). This experience became the source for his inner calm and courage. It was a received moment, not a self-produced moment, that allowed him to carry on with great vision amid very frightening circumstances. Likewise, receptive to the inner calling, Mahatma Gandhi’s regular habits of

meditation and reading of scripture were instrumental in providing him the imaginative insight needed to non-violently confront a whole empire. What we are talking about here, then, is a kenosis, a posture of emptying oneself as Jesus did (Phil 2:7a), that allows, permits and receives a deeper vision than what any unquestioned mind, or set of minds, could of themselves produce.

Thus, why is this sort of yielding, internal stillness necessary today? First, it is necessary in order to gain proper insight into reality amid often turbulent mental and emotional landscapes (within individuals and societies). Second, yielding or internal stillness is required in order to address social injustices with greater clarity and imagination. And third, a stopping – more like a kenotic yielding or surrendering – is necessary in order to properly respond to the societal crisis when it stares at us in the face. Let us examine each of these outcomes that result from yielding: (a) increase in insight; (b) enhanced imagination; and (c) growth in capacity to deal with the crisis.

### **Insight**

Hanh (2015) writes that “[w]e have to learn the art of stopping” (p. 24). He says that people are in a constant state of agitation, and in this state, they are quite powerless to stop their fear, despair or anger, or can they see reality clearly. Appropriately, then, in the Buddhist practice he teaches, mindfulness begins with “shamatha,” the act of stopping. For as difficult as it can be to stop our running habit energies, there are simple mindfulness practices that he says can bring us to a stopping point: watching the breath, calling oneself to presence in this moment and refusing to wait until some future time, bringing oneself to smile, walking slowly, or noticing the non-tooth-ache. He goes on to explain that with stopping comes calming, which allows for rest, and with rest comes healing. He writes:

When animals in the forest get wounded, they find a place to lie down, and they rest completely for many days. They don't think about food or anything else. They just rest, and they get the healing they need. When we humans get sick, we just worry! We look for doctors and medicine, but we don't stop. Even when we go to the beach or the mountains for a vacation, we don't rest, and we come back more tired than before. We have to learn to rest (Hanh, 2015, p.27).

Interestingly, the very active founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Maathai, has also talked about the importance of rest. She tells

aspiring activists to make sure to give themselves a periodic Sabbath or a break from stimulation. Speaking from experience, she knows that this rest is necessary to effectively respond to the needs of the earth. Maathai explains with an analogy:

Even rivers, which can flow with torrential force, reach a wetland area where the waters slow down and move in circles... It may seem that the river is simply meandering and stagnating, but wetlands can be very fertile areas that provide a lot of life and clean water. So it is with moments of reflection (Maathai, 2010, p. 153-4).

By stepping back, the activist can find clarity and direction, and very importantly, can become replenished to return to the difficult work ahead. This may be counter-intuitive for those wanting to “get things done,” but there is no getting things done if one is too exhausted to properly gauge the situation in front of them.

Indeed, rest is also necessary to distinguish between complex mental, emotional and social landscapes. Hanh has stated that all of the world’s problems are due to the wrong perception— the mental war in one person or between two people becomes a war between nations... when the wrong perception remains unquestioned (MindfulCloud PBC, 2013). Right perception requires stillness; it requires stopping for long enough to recognize and accept our mental and emotional realities without dragging them into the future or projecting them outward to the rest of the world. Insight comes when we have given enough time and space to look deeply. So Hanh writes: “With insight, we know what to do and what not to do to change [the given] situation” (Hanh, 2015, p. 26).

Christian spiritual teacher Bourgeault gets at something similar in her explanation of the welcoming practice, which offers a way to acknowledge, welcome, and eventually let go of the sensations that build in our bodies during distressing physical or emotional situations (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 172). She explicates:

At the sensation level, the issue is simply this: in any life situation, confronted by an outer threat or opportunity, you have a choice between two options. You can either harden and brace defensively, or you can yield and soften internally. The first response will plunge you immediately into your small self, with its animal instincts and survival responses. The second will allow you to stay aligned with your heart, where the odds of

a creative outcome are infinitely better (Bourgeault, 2008, pp. 173-174).

Notice that the choice is between hardening/plunging immediately and yielding/softening internally. The first response just happens, and it gets us into a lot of trouble. Bourgeault explains: “Our core woundings ..., together with our misguided search for compensation, drive most of the unconscious behavior which is the source of our continuing human suffering” (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 180). On the other hand, the second response requires a cushion or space to let the yielding and softening happen. With the yielding and softening comes the ability to move beyond the small self with its animal instincts and survival operational modes, to an alignment with the heart, which, in Star Wars lingo, is like operating in “the force” (Bourgeault, 2008, p.174). As long as there is right inward alignment, whatever one decides to do about the external situations will be a true decision, not a product of the habit horse just carrying one along.

Bourgeault holds that contrary to popular interpretation, the Pauline hymn, “Let the same mind be in you as was seen in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), does not merely call people to act as Jesus acted, but rather to be as Jesus was. To be in the same mind as was seen in Jesus is to be in the same inner alignment that enabled him to operate with an extraordinary openness to life no matter the external circumstances (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 171). Inner surrender allows one to operate with clarity which simply would not be possible otherwise. Bourgeault writes that in surrender one performs “an act of spiritual intelligence [that results] in a markedly increased capacity for creative response” (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 175); it literally opens neural pathways that enable the creative response (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 177). In other words, internal surrender – which requires time and space for reflection – is indispensable for creative insight.

### **Imagination**

There is a lot at stake in people’s ability to respond to their mental and emotional landscapes with insight and creativity because without this creative insight in place, there is no room to challenge unjust societal structures. Lutheran ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda argues that most of the unjust global structures that necessitate human poverty and ecological degradation are upheld by hegemonic vision whereby evil effectively disguises itself as “good, social necessity, normal, or simply

inevitable” (2013:86). In other words, evil often hides from those who perpetuate it. She provides a culturally sanctioned scenario: a person in the United States prides herself in buying several shirts at a bargain price (a seeming good), not realizing, or dismissing as inevitable, the extreme low wages of the women who made those bargain shirts halfway across the world, and the polluted stream resulting from the dyes used in those shirts (an evil) (2013:68-71). Moe-Lobeda argues that on the one hand, there is persistent societal blindness to structural evil (particularly among the privileged), and on the other hand, there is a remarkable lack of imagination and hope to conceive of a different way forward. She writes: “[w]here we experience no hope for change and no power to move toward it, ‘the way things are’ becomes ‘the way things simply must be’” (2013:96). A creative, imaginative response becomes absolutely necessary if we are to live in a more just world.

As feminists across the globe make clear, an imaginative response to injustice first requires people’s ability to see beyond their own epistemological limitations. Implicit racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism (to name only a few isms) happen where assumptions about people, the world and God remain unquestioned. For this reason, Gebara (1999) opens her Ecofeminist text, *Longing for Running Water*, with a chapter on epistemology. There she challenges people “to resist the temptation to allow the various dogmas we have created in the course of history to dull our cognitive faculties” (Gebara, 1999, p. 19) to question not only our assumptions but also how we came to acquire them. She argues that ways of knowing are determined by those in power. Historically, what has been regarded as factual knowledge was formulated by elite human males, while variant knowledge has been ignored, shamed, denied, or even been cause for persecution. Gebara’s aim, then, is to “loosen the soil of our certainties” (Gebara, 1999, p. 30), particularly where those certainties are no longer valid or beneficial. In this manner, questioning and replacing destructive certainties is a fundamental step in establishing justice, as are the practices of dialogue and listening to the disenfranchised.

In her article, “The Critical Aesthetics of Race,” Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland shows that in order to profoundly shift our knowing (our epistemologies) we must risk nothing less than full conversion. Take racism as a case. Copeland states that in a racist culture where one racial group is deemed normative, the privileged racial group gets to be portrayed as the beacon of “virtue, morality, and goodness... ,

while vice, immorality, and evil are assigned to the others” (2012:81). This racism is established at the level of assumption, set in deep caverns of consciousness, causing thought patterns and behaviors that the privileged can enact while being blind to them. As Copeland puts it, “[r]acism is no mere problem to be solved but a construal of reality, a distorted way of being human in the world” (2012:80). Explaining how to re-constitute a racist culture and begin to truly live as “God’s human creatures,” she uses profound theological language: i.e. “exorcizes,” “incarnating” and finally, “conversion”: “For resisting racism should bring about change in us: change in our attentiveness, in our questions, in our reflection, in our judgments, in our decisions, in our choices, in our living, in our loving” (2012:84, 85). A full epistemological shift does not merely change minds; it shifts people’s living and loving at the core.

Whether we are talking about consumerism or patriarchy or racism or any other injustice, the point here is that they are diseases that infect human consciousness. To be cured of the disease and restore health is no small feat even as people become aware, so deeply are these illnesses implanted in human consciousness. Both Moe-Lodeba and Copeland beautifully demonstrate the power of conscious action for awakening justice inside and out. Moe-Lobeda explains: “we become what we do. What we ‘practice’ shapes what we value, how we see the world, our sense of what is right and good” (Moe-Lobeda, 2013, p. 258). Copeland gets at the same point:

[B]eauty is consonant with performance – that is, with ethical and moral behavior, with habit or virtue. In other words, beauty is the living up to and living out the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God’s human creatures (Copeland, 2012, p. 82).

To live in justice we must practice justice, we must form conscious habits of justice and love. Conscious action moves us to conversion, gives us the eyes to see broken systems and empowers us to create healthier realities.

But here we must make clear that action alone is not sufficient. For action to be conscious, for it to be based on a reality that transcends individual epistemological limitations, a stopping of sorts is necessary. That is, there must exist the ability to wait in internal stillness long enough to, in the very least, truly hear what others are saying and see clearly what the world needs, and at a deeper level, to perceive the

divine movement that underlies all things. Action cannot be conscious if it is not accompanied by a posture of receptivity and trust that in this internal awaiting, the divine will speak and new worlds will be revealed. Internal stillness or awaiting is certainly a stopping, though it can be practiced while the body is at rest or is moving. More than anything, this internal stillness is a contemplative posture that watches, listens, perceives, and very importantly, waits. A lot of discipline, patience and grace are necessary to allow one's mind to receive rather than incessantly produce, but the reward is also great, for it can open extraordinary new pathways.

Reflecting on the magnitude of the conversion needed to really tackle social injustices and entangled minds, I am reminded of Constance FitzGerald's argument that the only way for human consciousness to shift to the degree required is through a contemplative yielding, or as she puts it, a "waiting upon God" (FitzGerald, 2000, p. 216). She writes: "I often feel that only if we are prepared for transformation by contemplation and thereby given a new kind of consciousness and imagination will humanity and the earth, with its various eco-systems survive" (FitzGerald, 2000, p. 203). The contemplation she speaks of is a day-to-day practice of yielding, waiting and allowing God to do what God will do. In the deepest stages of contemplation, it becomes a "prayer of no experience," a "silent unknowing" and a "dark empty space of encounter with God" in which the memory is purified so that "a vision of a different kind of future than the one we want to construct from our limited capacities" may be born (FitzGerald, 2009, p. 35). For FitzGerald, the evolution of human consciousness depends on being able to yield sufficiently to God. In contemplative yielding, she writes, "one's perspective changes. One 'has God's view of things'" (FitzGerald, 2000, p. 220).

Drawing from John of the Cross, she holds that through the process of waiting in contemplation, people move beyond their limited epistemologies to consciousness so vast that she equities it with God's view of things. Writing from the very different spiritual location of Vedantic mysticism, Swami Ramdas gets at a similar point:

Mind is a veil that shuts you from the splendor of your immortal spirit, which is your real being. Tear up this veil by means of constant meditation and self-surrender. Retire within yourself from time to time and lose your little ego in the infinite consciousness of your supreme self. You are verily the



embodiment of truth. Wake up to this awareness (Weeraperuma, 2005, p. 105).

In both these cases, imagination springs from contact with deeper consciousness, which usually requires enough patience and waiting to let it pierce through our small egoic selves. Jesuit author De Mello has put it this way:

Only when you have pulled back enough to effectively distinguished between your true self and the external programming of your ego, will you experience that inner freedom from which alone all social revolution must arise, for the powerful emotion, the passion that arises in your heart at the sight of social evils and impels you to action, will [finally] have its origins in reality (De Mello, 1995, p. 18).

A creative and imaginative response to the world arises from a deeper location than our disparate epistemologies. And we come to this location not initially by doing, but by yielding or stopping in a kenotic posture of self-emptying.

### **Crisis**

FitzGerald thinks that, at least in the United States, we have been at a point of impasse for some time now. We have reached, as she puts it, a societal dark night, a societal impasse, which is evident in the presence of the poor and in “the scarred earth,” in whom “our [societal] violence is unveiled” (FitzGerald, 2000, p. 210). Despite how negative this may seem, FitzGerald holds that there is in fact great opportunity at this moment, so long as we are willing to stop pushing through it or running away. If we can allow ourselves to experience the limitations of our own humanity, if the ego can relinquish its control and surrender itself to mystery, and if the path into the unknown is freely taken (FitzGerald, 1984, p. 96), she believes that “new paradigms for living as a part of all life on earth and in the universe” (FitzGerald, 2000, p. 213) will arise. In other words, human habit energies have brought the earth to a point of socio-ecological crisis, but if, at this moment, a critical mass of people can yield in contemplation, a new consciousness and imaginative way forward will come into being.

Liberation theologian Leonardo Bofflikewise believes that we are at a point of an impasse – he calls it a crisis. He writes that in crisis we come to a “crossroads of extraordinary new pathways” (Bofflikewise, 2007, p. 1) – we can continue down the same socio-ecological path

and self-destruct, or we can reach into our spiritual depths and let it transform our consciousness into a new way of existing on this planet. This transformation is so drastic that we might say that it requires a kind of dying. Indeed, Franciscan sister Delio equates crisis with chaos and death, which sounds bad. But as an evolutionary scientist, she knows that from death comes new life (from decomposing wood, new trees are born in the forest). She states: “If we learn to die well we can embrace life more freely and fully. So we need to develop a consciousness of life that includes letting go; death – not as a finality – but as a transformative process” (Delio, 2012, p. 5). If we can surrender to the death of destructive habit energies, of harmful epistemologies and false egoic constructions, allowing space for deeper consciousness, what imaginative way forward will arise? What extraordinary pathways will open? How will human consciousness be transformed? Standing on this side of impasse it is hard to say. But we have reason to hope that, with greater clarity and insight we may indeed build a more just world than what exists now. We may come to know at our core that which Julian of Norwich relates in her *Showings*: “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well ... For there is a Force of Love in the Universe that holds us fast and will never let us go” (Chapter XXVII). In our contemplative, kenotic stopping, we may even come to operate by this very force of love.

## **Conclusion**

The argument in this article is in fact quite simple: that we, a people who are in a constant state of movement – who are indeed under pressure to do more, and to be busier – should focus our energies on cultivating internal stillness. As in the Zen story, we are all too mindlessly being driven by habit energies into painful byways and destructive paths. It may not be easy to get a critical mass of people to participate in the form of kenotic yielding we have been discussing, for the habit of continuous movement is strong, and the sort of death true surrender requires may be too much for many. Yet, I have tried to demonstrate that it is only in contemplative awaiting that we will truly become capable of addressing our turbulent mental and emotional landscapes with fresh insight and imagination. It is only in kenotic yielding that we will be able to undergo the transformation necessary to move from crisis to “extraordinary new pathways.” We have relied on unreflective habit energies long enough. Let us now yield and wait upon the divine

until we genuinely have “God’s view of things” and can operate in the “infinite consciousness of [our] supreme [selves]”!

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