

Q&A ON SUBTLE ACTIVISM AND THE WORK OF DAVID NICOL

How would you define subtle activism in a few words? What is meant by the word “subtle” in this context?

Subtle activism (SA) involves the use of consciousness-based practices like meditation, visualization, ritual, and prayer for collective transformation. “Subtle” in this context has two meanings:

1. To strike a contrast with more overt forms of social change (such as marching in the street, knocking on doors, etc); the latter would be considered a “gross” activity on graded scale of activities that are increasingly subtle or non-physical—i.e., concerned with the mind and “heart.”
2. To suggest that we are literally working in the so-called “subtle dimensions” or metaphysical planes of reality.

How did you first enter into the field of subtle activism? Did you begin as a theorist, or more as an activist trying to change society?

My work in subtle activism emerged organically after a long journey of attempting to reconcile my twin passions for spiritual realization and political change. I started that journey as an environmental lawyer, but then life events led me to discover the power of synchronized global meditations as a way to seed change at an even deeper level. My work as a theorist in the field came later as a way to provide a coherent explanation for the significance of this new approach.

In your writings you describe real instances of how focused intention in a group setting led to social and political change. What are some of the most important examples in history that demonstrate this phenomenon?

1. **The Big Ben Minute**, a period of silence each day that occurred during WWII, involved about five million people every day at 9pm GMT throughout British Commonwealth. It was endorsed at the highest levels of British society and is a significant example of a subtle activism initiative that had mainstream acceptance in a modern Western nation.

2. **The Sarvodaya Peace Meditations** in Sri Lanka involved hundreds of thousands of people and was followed shortly thereafter by the signing of an historic peace treaty.

Caveat: In the absence of scientific controls in these cases, it’s hard to know for certain the impact of such historical instances of subtle activism. But in more recent times, scientific studies published in peer-reviewed journals provide empirical proof that consciousness-based practices really do have a measureable social effect (see below).

Your book points to the idea that “consciousness is a nonlocal phenomenon.” How would you define that concept? What makes it so important in understanding subtle activism?

Consciousness is not simply a by-product of our individual human brains. It is more like an intrinsic, irreducible property of reality itself. By “non-local” I mean that interactions can occur in consciousness between two entities widely separated in space or time, with no intermediate mechanism involved. This idea is crucial to understanding of what I call the “strong” theory of subtle activism, which maintains that the social effect of our consciousness-based practices is immediate and instantaneous. This notion is common to most of the world’s wisdom traditions and, as I show in my book, has been confirmed by empirical science.

When you first came across the evidence that consciousness is a nonlocal phenomenon, were you surprised, or did it simply confirm what you already knew intuitively?

I already knew it intuitively but I was surprised by the *strength* of the evidence in many cases, given that this is a phenomenon that is very difficult to quantify or measure.

How does the study of subtle activism relate to the field of parapsychology? Is it a branch of that field, or something separate?

Parapsychology research is important for the study of SA because it provides a large body of empirical evidence which suggests that nonlocal awareness is possible and has been demonstrated under controlled conditions. Subtle activism applies that notion in service to positive social transformation. Subtle-activism research can be seen as a branch of parapsychology that investigates the effect of human intentionality on social systems.

You cite a variety of theories to explain how consciousness-based practices can affect social change. What are the most helpful ones for those who are new to this subject?

Among these are Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, which he defines as a common or universal layer of the psyche. Associated with this is the idea that when an individual or group works at a deep enough level of their own unconscious mind, they can affect the unconscious psyche of many others—or even of whole nations or all of humanity. Another important idea is Rupert Sheldrake's theory of *morphic fields*, the idea that all living systems inherit a kind of collective memory created by the repeated behaviors of previous members of their species. Each member of the species is influenced by the pre-existing "species field," but also contributes to and shapes it. This same idea applies to human societies as well, especially if the repeated activity is intentional and synchronized.

What is the current status of the scientific research into the use of consciousness-based practices to create social change? What is it telling us?

The main body of evidence we have is research into the so-called "Maharishi Effect," in which scientists have measured a variety of parameters of social impact on a city or locality when groups of people practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) in that area for short periods of time. These findings are very substantive, involving over 40 studies, with 28 of them published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. The Maharishi Effect seems well established, and has been reproduced many times. What we observe in these studies is strong "effect sizes" that are very statistically significant, such as measureable reductions in the crime rate in the area in which the synchronized meditations take place. I would like to see similar studies performed using different consciousness-based methods other than TM.

What are your views about the current national and planetary dilemmas we now face? Can subtle activism address all of these issues, or just some of them?

SA goes to the root issue of the division and polarization that underlies our many problems. Our work can help bring our planet into balance through a shift in consciousness toward a deeper awareness of intrinsic human interconnectedness. In our turbulent times there seems clearly to be a need for gentle forms of intervention that soften divisive boundaries and allow for the emergence

of a more universal and inclusive perspective. SA is not, however, a magic bullet; it works best in conjunction with inspired programs of pragmatic action.

What is your role right now in the subtle activism movement? What aspect of this current work do you find most interesting or exciting?

One primary role seems to be, by means of my book, to name the field and to establish its intellectual foundations. As a teacher of subtle activism, another role is to develop and teach creative methods to groups that apply this approach in ever more effective and inspirational ways. As an event organizer, I help to develop increasingly sophisticated ways to bring large numbers of people together around the planet for truly meaningful experiences of global subtle activism. I'm also called to work collaboratively with other leaders and organizations in the field so that our various efforts can come together in more coherent ways.

Look forward into the future. What role will subtle activism have in the social and political activism of the future?

I hope SA will become widely recognized as a crucial foundation for all forms of social and political activism. My ultimate hope is that it can even transcend the realm of activism itself and become woven into everyday life as a ritual that supports us in accessing our collective wisdom in relation to many different dimensions of contemporary life.