Zen and the Art of Social Movement Maintenance

written by James K. Rowe | March 24, 2015

[This article was originally published by Waging Nonviolence.]

Angela Davis, revolutionary activist and philosopher, is a committed yogi. She began practicing in prison when a doctor working with the Black Panther Party passed along a book on yoga to help her deal with chronic headaches.

The poses worked, and many years later Davis continues with her sun salutations. She currently practices under the guidance of Oakland-based yoga teacher Naushon Kabat-Zinn, daughter of medical researcher and mindfulness popularizer Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn, the elder, defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally." The most common form mindfulness practice takes is sitting meditation. Mindfulness can be applied more broadly, however, as the recent spate of books on everything from mindful sex to mindful politics suggests.

In January, Angela Davis shared an Oakland stage with Kabat-Zinn as part of a sold-out fundraiser for the East Bay Meditation Center, or EBMC, which is a leader in efforts to integrate mindfulness practices and social justice. Kabat-Zinn is no stranger to social justice, having been an activist in the anti-war movement at MIT in the late 1960s, and being the son-in-law of the late social movement historian Howard Zinn, author of "A People's History of the United States." Kabat-Zinn is also a spiritual friend to Silicon Valley giants, regularly giving talks to Google and Facebook. He is on the vanguard of what *Time* recently called the "Mindful Revolution," a mainstreaming of mindfulness practices being powered by new research illuminating the health and cognitive benefits. Kabat-Zinn's "Mindfulnness-based stress reduction," a secular training program based on Buddhist principles, is currently being taught to school children, U.S. marines and corporate employees.

Angela Davis' Marxism, and Kabat-Zinn's cheerful embrace of corporate America, are not an easy match. Indeed, Kabat-Zinn's work appears to vindicate Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek's critique of Western Buddhism as a supplement to neoliberal capitalism: "It enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it." But Davis has seen the benefits of mind/body practices and is not so swift to dismiss them. How can mindfulness genuinely support social justice? This was the basic question she kept returning to in Oakland.

"In a racially unjust world," Davis earnestly asked Kabat-Zinn, "what good is mindfulness?" He

responded by noting how the heightened awareness enabled by mindfulness practice can progressively uproot the greed, hatred and delusion that cause so much collective suffering. Davis, however, was not satisfied with his response, emphasizing that racism is not simply a set of personal attitudes, but a whole system. How can practices focused on personal habits of mind generate lasting systemicchange?

Near the end of the evening, Davis offered an answer to her own question. She noted how mindfulness might become a revolutionary force if embedded in social movements that target oppressive systems. But what forms can that integration take? What does a true mindful revolution look like?

While the brief discussion between Davis and Kabat-Zinn remained abstract, actually existing experiments at the intersection of mindfulness and social change are blossoming. Several organizations are now focusing their efforts on the fold between subjective and social change: the Center for Transformative Change, Generative Somatics and the Movement Strategy Center are three leaders. At the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit in 2010, activists from these groups passed a resolution that read: "We acknowledge that we as agents of change, having been deeply affected by our conditions of oppression, need a deep and abiding commitment to *embody* the revolutionary change we seek … Revolutionary, systemic change is needed internally, in our relations and in our external conditions."

Embodied practices from singing and dancing, along with spiritual forms like prayer and ceremony, have been central to all successful social movements. But the integration of mind/body practices like meditation and yoga into secular and multi-faith movements in the West, is a recent and growing trend. This trend was exemplified during the Occupy Wall Street explosion of 2011. Practices like yoga and meditation were woven throughout Occupy, and were integral to its endurance and impact; they were not a sideshow. This is a part of the Occupy story that remains untold, and yet holds vital lessons for the growing body of activists and mind/body practitioners wondering what good mindfulness can do in an unjust world.

Strategic meditation

Meditation and yoga came to Occupy through multiple sources. Meditation Flash Mob, or MedMob, a grassroots organization that began in 2011, had conducted their own public meditations in the financial district in the summer months prior to Occupy. Meditation flash mobs are a form of culture jamming that aim to constructively interrupt daily life in urban centers, and perform the benefits of mindful awareness. Once Occupy began, many MedMob participants joined the encampment, naming a tree in the northwest corner of the park "The Tree of Life," which quickly became a focal point for spiritual practices of all kinds.

Along with members from MedMob, the Interdependence Project, or IDP, an organization that offers secular Buddhist study and practice, helped facilitate daily meditations in Zuccotti Park. Adreanna Limbach was coordinating the activism branch of IDP at the time, and was eager to support the new movement. The initial intent of Limbach and IDP was to provide a service to Occupiers, to offer space and time for centering amidst the bustle of the park. But during her engagement with Occupy, Limbach noticed how divisions along the axes of race and class that the movement was seeking to transform were being replicated in the very geography and interactions of the encampment itself. For example, the northeast side of the park was primarily inhabited by middle class white people, and came to be called "The Upper East Side Sacks." The southwest side, however, was largely black and Latino.

"About three weeks into my experience at Occupy," Limbach explained, "I began to think of

meditation practice less as a service, and more a strategy, since we are bound to recreate structures of injustice in our daily interactions if we are not working with internal belief systems, and how they are shaped by power, privilege and positionality."

Meditation and yoga, however, do not automatically nurture an anti-racist and egalitarian ethos. If they did, Western practice communities would be sanctuaries from what bell hooks calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy." As hooks has noted, based on her experience as a Buddhist and a woman of color, exclusions along multiple axes of oppression — such as race and class — continue to shape the dissemination of meditation and yoga in the West.

These exclusions were apparent during Occupy itself. Tashy Endres, who offered training in nonviolent communication during the encampment, told me a troubling story about how a difficult conversation regarding race got railroaded. It happened during a meeting where everyone was asked to join in a collective chant of "Om," which effectively drowned out a black woman who was sharing her frustrations with the group. Endres remains committed to mind/body practices as supplements to social justice work, and integrates body awareness exercises into her nonviolent communications work. She does not, however, see them as guarantees of compassionate or just action.

"It is important to combine structural analysis with spiritual practice," she said. "Otherwise, you are likely to replicate oppressions and exclusions no matter how many hours you meditate." When embodied practices are combined with social justice work, Endres explained, they can allow for a deeper incorporation of radically egalitarian values than is possible through solely intellectual exercises, like education and debate. "For me, when struggle and mindfulness are combined, both can flourish."

In an essay called "Buddhism and the Politics of Domination," bell hooks provocatively notes how mindful awareness can be skillfully used to "release the attachment to dominator thinking and practice." Other activists agree that the integration of mind/body practice and anti-oppression work is rich with potential. Joshua Stephens, an activist and author who blogged from Occupy Wall Street for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, explained, "If you look at the general mechanics of anti-oppression discourse and training, it is observing how socialization and social structure speak through us, and then finding points of intervention so that we can make deliberate decisions about our agency rather than just moving through racist, patriarchal, colonial inertia. It is a form of meditation."

Similarly, angel Kyodo williams, author of "Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace," spoke with me about how meditation can help people notice transphobic, racist or sexist thoughts as they may move through our bodies. According to williams, this observing and examination of our own unconscious prejudices, can start to rewrite the oppressive scripts circulating in our cultures and communities. Furthermore, as williams explained, mind/body practices can also help heal the embodied wounds to dignity inflicted by systems of domination. Meditation, yoga and other somatic techniques can nurture self-acceptance from an internal and primal place, untouched by the systems of domination that work to belittle particular humans in the service of privileging others.

"There is a place that we find when we look deeply into ourselves," williams writes in "Being Black," "that allows us to be completely free of our histories, our stories, our hang-ups … We actually have a freedom spot in our brains." Time spent connecting to this freedom spot through mindfulness practices can be profoundly healing for those of us who have been systematically pushed to doubt our dignity.

Organizations that do anti-oppressive training to build movement power, like theCatalyst Project based in San Francisco, have begun integrating embodied awareness and mindfulness practices into their organizing work. In general, however, the tactical integration of mind/body and anti-oppression work is underdeveloped; it remains a site of great transformative potential.

The General Assembly: Touching Occupy's heart

Occupy Wall Street's radically democratic vision was most clearly enacted through the General Assembly decision-making process, a forum in which everyone could participate. Because the assembly operated by consensus, participants needed to work through objections to any proposal until the entire group could agree. The process could become challenging and tedious. During conversations with Occupy activists, I learned that, while short meditations like moments of silence were used by assembly facilitators in the early days of the camp, the practice became more common as the occupation continued, and challenges intensified.

"As decision-making processes began breaking down," facilitator Marisa Holmes explained to me, "with more disruption coming from within the camp, from the state, from all angles, we used these practices more and more."

Why did facilitators turn to mindfulness-based activities in response to intensifying conflict? I asked Leslie Booker, who explained the transformative potential of these practices in the context of Occupy's general assemblies. Booker, who had worked with a New York-based group called the Lineage Project to teach yoga and meditation to incarcerated youth, was completing mindful yoga training at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California when Occupy began. She returned to New York and became a core organizer of the daily meditations. Based on her work organizing daily sits in the park, Booker was invited to a facilitators meeting.

"I had been to almost every general assembly," she explained, "and they could be really violent and aggressive." Booker instructed facilitators on how to start all assemblies with grounding exercises. (She was careful not to call these practices "meditations" because she believed that word might have religious or spiritual connotations that could potentially alienate participants.) These practices were brief — under 10 minutes — and had participants focus attention on their breath prior to setting a collective intention for the meeting.

"Setting an intention before we started really shifted things," Booker reflected. She reported how consensus process became less aggressive after regular grounding exercises were introduced. A number of individual working groups — smaller teams of activists focused on aspects of the occupation like facilitation — began incorporating their own grounding practices.

"It was cool to see people do it in a way that makes sense for them," Booker noted. "We don't have to get into dogma or into dharma, it was just as simple as how can I take a moment to ground myself."

Occupy Manifest: Retreating to advance

While grounding exercises helped ease aggression and facilitate communication among Occupiers, they could not stop the violent eviction executed by the New York Police Department in November 2011. They were also unable to transform debilitating internal conflicts that weakened the occupation. At the root of these conflicts, many activists believed, was the fundamental disagreement over whether and how Occupiers should engage with structures of power, including more established institutions on the left, like unions. According to activists I interviewed, this failure

to find a place between uncritical engagement, and a blanket refusal to engage more established institutions for fear of cooptation, was a fundamental barrier to the movement's progress.

"I think a lot of mistakes resulted from the inability to engage with power, interact with it and build strategies around how to shift it," said journalist Nathan Schneider, who is an editor-at-large for *Waging Nonviolence* and the author of "Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse."

The ability to engage strategically with power structures, some activists came to see, required that they first develop a strong internal set of values. "My hypothesis is that a lot of fears around movement cooptation were actually fears about personal cooptation," said Brooke Lehman, a veteran in the New York activist scene who offered direct democracy training during the encampment. Many Occupiers were new to political organizing, and had not yet deeply rooted themselves in their values. If Occupiers could gain a firmer sense of their politics and life purpose, Lehman believed, they might reduce their fear of being coopted and therefore feel more comfortable working with people with different political beliefs.

Lehman's theory attracted her to work that fellow activists Kobi and Michael Badger were doing to organize leadership trainings for Occupiers called Occupy Manifest. The trainings involved multiple weekend retreats, a number of which were held at theWatershed Center, a retreat space Lehman helped create for activists, located on a farm two hours north of New York City. A key goal of the Occupy Manifest gatherings, which began shortly after the encampment ended, was to provide activists with the space to collectively reflect on their deepest values, and to use tools like meditation to begin embodying those values as fully as possible.

Many of the participants in Occupy Manifest became leaders in the Occupy Sandy relief effort after the superstorm hit New York on Oct. 29, 2012. Occupy Sandy was tremendously successful in its response, using social media to quickly raise over $1 million and mobilize 60,000 volunteers — four times the number of volunteers engaged by the Red Cross. A key element of Occupy Sandy's success was participants' willingness to work across political differences, coordinating activities with churches, FEMA and other relief organizations that didn't necessarily share Occupy's values and horizontalist style of organizing. According to Kobi, who was involved in both Occupy Manifest and Occupy Sandy, the training provided activists with the tools needed to cooperate across political differences without giving up non-negotiable principles. For Kobi, the deeper trust in self that the trainings facilitated for activists was integral to Occupy Sandy's flexibility, openness and overall success.

Planting seeds for collective liberation

Occupy Wall Street is not a complete answer to Angela Davis' question of "What good is mindfulness in a racially unjust world?" But it revealed important ways mind/body practice can support collective struggle: from improving anti-oppression training to facilitating alliance formation across political differences. The intersection of personal and political transformation remains pregnant with potential.

During their dialogue, Jon Kabat-Zinn noted his original skepticism towards Davis's radical stance on prison abolition. "But then you gave me your book, 'Are Prisons Obsolete,' and I've changed my mind. I think it's a fantastic idea."

Mindfulness alone will not spark a political revolution, but when joined by actual revolutionaries, it

might expand all of our possibilities for freedom.