

# What Is Spiritual Activism?

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

If by activism is meant the kind of action that is intended to bring about socio-cultural change, then *spiritual* activism is such action engaged from a perspective that takes spiritual values, principles, and goals into account. But what is meant by “spiritual”? Here the matter becomes somewhat more complicated. In part, the answer will depend on one’s religious or philosophical leanings. Thus, a practicing Christian is likely to respond differently from a practicing Buddhist. My own answer, as furnished in the following, gestures toward a more generic formulation, though I am mostly inspired by the sophisticated tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Outside the Christian religious context in which it took shape, the term “spiritual” tends to be used rather indiscriminately and ambiguously. Linguistically and historically, it refers to “spirit,” which stands for the “higher,” “transcendental” aspect of the human being. This concept is problematic and has been rejected by many thinkers, including some Christian theologians. In light of this, I propose to use “spiritual” here in the sense of “self-transcending.” This captures the kind of orientation and actual conduct that aims at going beyond egotism and, even more profoundly, beyond the very sense of ego. Instead, it favors a state of consciousness that experiences itself as deeply connected to the rest of the world.

Thus, using the term “spiritual” is a concession to popular parlance but without the hypostasis that is often associated with the cognate term “spirit.” Spiritual activism, then, is activism in which theory and practice converge to fulfill our greater human potential, notably our capacity for self-transcendence, regardless of our specific religious or philosophical direction.

For spiritual activism to be authentic, it must be grounded in [mindfulness](#) and [reverence for life](#) as vital voluntary disciplines. Without the proper cultivation of these two practices, spiritual activism is apt to become mere conventional activism, which is often driven by subconscious motives and undesirable emotions that have little to do with the proclaimed ideals and goals.

Mindfulness allows a spiritual activist to inspect the forces that have shaped his character and life and carefully distinguish between them and his socio-cultural ideals and activist goals. For instance, even when anger at environmental devastation is present, a spiritual activist will not permit his angry feelings to color his action. Rather, everything he does will be tempered appropriately by his reverence for life. He will deploy the raw energy of anger to initiate positive action, that is, action intended to promote benign change. He will, however, carefully neutralize the target of his anger, be it a single individual, a group, or “the system.” There are traditional methods for achieving this neutralization, but they call for a strong commitment to treat all of life reverentially.

In addition to checking his negative emotions, a spiritual activist also constantly examines the basis for his transformative conduct. In other words, he applies extreme responsibility in his decisions and choices, ensuring that his activism will not have unwanted consequences jeopardizing the welfare of others. For example, actions that could be labeled as “eco-terrorism” typically involve deliberate or involuntary (because of lack of foresight) harming of some beings in order to benefit a select few other beings. Reverence for life demands the utmost circumspection lest one’s “good” deeds should have an undesirable outcome or side effect.

Would it be responsible, for instance, to blow up a dam to allow salmon to swim upstream without impediment if this action were to kill numerous other creatures? Most people would feel that it would most certainly be reprehensible if it were accidentally to kill a human being. Would such drastic action be justifiable if it were to save an entire species? Perhaps, if all the factors involved in the situation were known and clearly understood. Unquestionably, different spiritual activists would draw the line differently. In any case, they would exercise immense care in their actions and would always be guided by the ideal of reverence for life.

For a spiritual activist, all of life is precious, not merely human life. At the same time, he understands that life is sustained by life. That is to say, for most life forms to persist, they must consume other life forms. But this is not a license to kill casually or to stomp out life out of sheer negligence or disregard. On this point, the strict morality of nonharming as practiced in Jainism is exemplary, though perhaps not entirely applicable in the context of contemporary life. Possibly, the ethics of Buddhism—though still rigorous—affords a more feasible model for everyday actualities in our modern era.

It is not my purpose in this brief essay to proffer specific prescriptions but merely to outline the fundamental principles of spiritual activism. I am inclined to believe that, as with any other person, a spiritual activist’s moral compass depends on his level of moral development. A full-fledged *bodhisattva*, who is irrevocably committed to eradicating the suffering of all beings by leading them to the great realization of enlightenment (flawless ego-transcendence) is likely to behave differently from a fledgling spiritual activist who is still struggling with his conscience and negative emotions.

Thus, spiritual activism can be expected to accommodate more than one response to the same situation. From the perspective of Buddhism, only a fully awakened person is able to act in a fully responsible and fully effective way. All others are bound to sleepwalk to some degree and hence also to commit more or less serious errors of moral judgment. This sobering perspective should instill in us humility and moderateness, as well as a willingness to continue to grow in wisdom and compassion.

As we ourselves change in the direction of greater self-transcendence—expressed in mindfulness, reverence for life, and active compassion for all beings—we become increasingly capable of benignly transforming the world.

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