

Rethinking *Satyagraha*: Reviving a Gandhian Ideal as a Foundation for the Practice of Transcendental Design

Prem Chandavarkar
CnT Architects, Bengaluru, India
prem@cnt.co.in

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Satyagraha

The term *satyagraha*, usually equated with the strategy of non-violent civil resistance Mohandas Gandhi championed to gain India's freedom from British colonization, has a far deeper meaning. It derives from the Sanskrit *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (grasp insistently) to connote a disciplined moral alertness that overcomes destabilizing circumstance by remaining anchored in truth.

Gandhi's notion of truth is revealed in his autobiography that eschews the convention of a consolidated narrative, written instead as a collection of independent weekly instalments published over four years in his journal *Navjivan*. The instalments often contradict each other yet Gandhi insisted the collection's focus was on truth, titling it "The Story of My Experiments with Truth."¹ To Gandhi, one's body is a sacred site containing far more than self-centered intention and desire, for it is imbued with an *antaryami* (divine spirit within). Everything one thinks, says, or does should be shaped by the exhortations of one's antaryami. The challenge of satyagraha lies in sustaining indwelling truth rather than discovering external truth. Given that one keeps facing new challenges, truth is not about unwavering adherence to fixed or abstract ideals but predicated on the consistent practice of satyagraha to discerningly anchor in one's antaryami and its compassionate entanglement in the world. Truth is a state of being, a discerning continuity of moral reckoning rather than an abstract and fixed certainty.

The Public Realm

Gandhi was very critical of the Western model for a democratic polity founded on Enlightenment values of a social contract founded on rationality and his concept of satyagraha calls for a radically different approach to structuring the public realm. While this is a complex topic whose depth is beyond the scope of this paper, some broad comparisons are contained in Table 1.

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: Or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Critical Edition Introduced with Notes by Tridip Suvrud, trans. Mahadev Desai (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2018).

Enlightenment Model	Satyagraha Model
Tabula rasa at birth and capacity for reason as foundation for democratic equality.	Body as sacred site (antaryami) as foundation for democratic equality.
Rational consensus through a system of checks and balances as foundation for institutions of democracy.	Antaryami calls for <i>swaraj</i> (<i>swa</i> = self; <i>raj</i> = rule), an individual bodily autonomy as the building block for democracy. Democratic public realm institutionalizes from the bottom up through decentralization of power based on the principle of subsidiarity.
Clear demarcation between public and private realms.	A necessary resonance between an inner sacred realm and an ethical public realm.
Rationality of public realm requires the sacred be confined to the private realm.	A desacralized public realm reduces civic life to an abstraction that dispels the essence of what it is to be human. The inherent autonomy of <i>swaraj</i> resists religious orthodoxy, so a public realm respectful of <i>swaraj</i> does not find the sacred to be problematic. A desacralized public realm embeds, at its core, a structural capacity for violence.

Table 1: A Comparison of the Enlightenment and Satyagraha Models for a Democratic Polity

Consciousness

One need not blindly subscribe to Gandhi's faith in the antaryami for parallels can be found in the contemporary study of consciousness. Four facets of consciousness are considered:

1. The Miracle of Consciousness: Physicist, Brian Greene, points out we are physical bodies constituted from particles completely governed by the laws of physics yet, by a process science is yet to explain, these particles miraculously cohere into a consciousness that can love, play, create, ideate, feel beauty, and so much more.² Poor scientific understanding is no obstacle to celebrating life by reveling in this miracle of one's consciousness.
2. Consciousness Grasps the Unmeasurable: Embodied consciousness knows far more than the intellect can comprehend or tell.³ Love, joy, beauty, wonder, reverence, humor – to name some significant attributes of a worthwhile life – are unmeasurable and resist definition yet known as tangible reality when experienced. Ideological or intellectual bias that blocks wholehearted embrace of this experiential core impoverishes us and our roots in our milieu.
3. Bringing Rigor to Experience: Philosopher, David Chalmers, posits that scientific investigation of consciousness is both an easy and hard problem.⁴ The easy problem uncovers neural correlates to facets of consciousness. The hard problem demands explaining how physical bodies produce qualitative subjective experience. One cannot resolve the hard problem through findings from the easy problem for that would confuse causation with correlation.

² Brian Greene, "This Tiny Slice of Eternity," interview by Krista Tippett, *The On Being Project*, July 15, 2020, <https://onbeing.org/programs/brian-greene-this-tiny-slice-of-eternity/>, Accessed 23 December, 2023.

³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁴ David Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Volume 2, No. 3 (March 1995), 200-19.

The hard problem is hard because it seeks an explanation of consciousness from a position outside consciousness. Daily life precludes this position, necessitating exploration of possibilities within consciousness by imparting rigor to it without overreliance on intellectual or scientific explanation. This approach has a millennia long history in India postulating that mindful experiential practice can overcome sensory distraction, egocentric temptation, and rigid ideology to reveal the subtle yet powerful unity of inner spirit and transcendent universe. Three promising practices from this history, that were personified by Gandhi's practice of satyagraha, are:

- a) *Sadhana*: a rigorous, repetitive, ego-transcending practice that produces two impacts. Firstly, it slowly ingrains the sense of a craft into the embodied self to increase the spontaneity with which practice achieves mastery. Secondly, it reveals subtle yet powerful dimensions, that can only be known experientially, such as when a musician, through practice, trains the ear and body to discern microtones and fine-drawn shifts in timing that radically increase the music's impact.
- b) *The Four Yogas*: Yoga means discipline and connotes a regular and ordered practice that empowers transcendental discovery Swami Vivekananda has written the most popular text identifying the four yogas of Indian tradition:⁵ (i) *Bhakti Yoga* – embracing faith and surrender to transcend all filters of perception; (ii) *Karma Yoga* – pursuing one's work with commitment by dedicating it to a higher cause with no personal attachment to the fruits of action; (iii) *Raj Yoga* – enhancing one's contemplative awareness through meditation and exercise; and (iv) *Jñāna Yoga* – acquiring knowledge that expands one's sense of being.
- c) *Ashtanga (eight limbs) Yoga*: Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* identify eight limbs of Raj Yoga for a morally disciplined and purposeful life:⁶ (i) *Yama* – ethical rules; (ii) *Niyama* – virtuous observances; (iii) *Āsana* – steady, comfortable, and contemplative posture; (iv) *Prāṇāyāma* – tuning into breath as energy; (v) *Pratyāhāra* – retracting awareness inward; (vi) *Dhāraṇā* – one-pointed attention; (vii) *Dhyāna* – contemplative focus; (viii) *Samādhi* – union with transcendental reality.

Emphasis on conscious experience does not mean intellect serves no useful role for it offers a critical alertness resisting degeneration of experience into self-absorbed habit. Effective professionals do not separate reflection and action and acquire an ability for 'reflection-in-action.'⁷

4. Wonder and 'Lantern Consciousness.' The myth of an analytical left brain tackling language and logic and a creative right brain tackling image and metaphor survives in popular imagination. Neuroscience has long debunked this to show that both brain hemispheres are involved in all subjects but in different ways. They hold a creative tension between attention to detail and appreciation of context, springing from an evolutionary history requiring a focus on detail to find food while aware of context to evade predators.⁸ Cognitive scientist, Alison Gopnik, terms these two modes 'spotlight consciousness' (which seeks to manipulate the world) and 'lantern consciousness' (which memorializes embodied immersion in the world). Children, due to the comparatively slow development of the prefrontal cortex (the executive brain), are inherently strong in lantern consciousness, perceiving themselves within an

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Book of Yoga*, (Mumbai: Sanage Publishing House, 2020).

⁶ Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, translation and commentary by Swami Vivekananda (New Delhi: Srishti Publishers & Distributors, 2021).

⁷ Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983).

⁸ Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

enchanted world generously offering wonder and learning.⁹ Adults tend to succumb to the spotlight and lose this ability; a loss avoidable by practicing experiential rigor.

Reveling in the miracle of consciousness, communing with the unmeasurable, pursuing reflective rigor of conscious experience, and comprehending an enchanted world through lantern consciousness, all echo the Gandhian foothold of antaryami and the quest to satyagraha it provokes.

Pattern

Human society is a complex adaptive system, and a fundamental feature of such systems is that its participants internally encode a schema of the world that reflexively shapes their identity, relationship with environment, and the qualities of the system itself.¹⁰ Through this feature, such systems display the capacity for emergence: the ability of a system to develop fundamental properties at its core that cannot be found in earlier states or sub-scales of the system. The schema restructures the world as comprehensible pattern that resonates with inner patterns of consciousness, calling for a consciousness that participates in the world rather than an ego that detaches from it.¹¹ A society disconnected from pattern has broken a primordial connection between the body and the world it inhabits.¹² Consequently, design must center on offering external pattern that evokes the emancipatory participation of inner consciousness.

The impulse toward a harmony of inner and outer pattern is reflected in dance where we intuitively create and become, in freedom and joy, pattern that binds movement, sensation, expression, and resonance with a reality beyond the self.¹³ Dance suggests an inborn embodied impulse, found in both professional and recreational dancers, that manifests across all cultures to joyously participate in broader pattern.

How should the architect approach this challenge? How should the connection be drawn between inner patterns of consciousness and the patterns of space and form that architecture offers? Joseph Rykwert suggests we view design as an act of translation.¹⁴ The language of design process deploys a vocabulary of ideas, sketches, drawings, models, and digital simulations. This holds little direct correspondence with the experiential and sensory language of inhabiting physical space over time. Design represents a translation from the language of process to the language of experience.

Good translation requires significantly greater fluency in the language being translated into than the language being translated from. For example, translating a poem from English into German needs enough English to appreciate the original poem and its nuances but demands being a masterful poet in German. Architects have tended to focus on fluency in the language of design process, validating the intangible dimensions of their work through peers who speak the same language, turning to measures such as publications, awards won, and acknowledgment by

⁹ Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love & the Meaning of Life* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009).

¹⁰ David Krakauer, "Complexity, Agency, and Information," *Sean Carroll's Mindscape Podcast*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.preposterousuniverse.com/podcast/2023/07/10/242-david-krakauer-on-complexity-age-ncy-and-information/>, Accessed 2 April, 2024.

¹¹ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹² Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972).

¹³ Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Joseph Rykwert, "Translation and/or Representation," *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 34 (September 1998): 64-70.

reputed critics. In contrast, design practice, if it aims to connect to the transcendental, is called to validate itself through a foundational fluency in the experiential core of human consciousness that is innately drawn into communion with a transcendent world; a fluency that can only be cultivated through a disciplined commitment to satyagraha.

The presentation will touch on a few proposals on spatial pattern that suggest a framework supportive to the resonances between spatial pattern and inner consciousness:

1. *Mental Mapping*: Architecture is always embedded within an environment, so there is no ultimate 'outside' from which its complete organizational structure can be perceived; there are only hierarchies of 'inside.' This requires that architecture offer spatial pattern by which it can be mentally imaged with reference to the inhabiting body.
2. *Peripheral Vision*: Focused vision creates a distance between spectator and object, whereas peripheral vision immerses us within space.¹⁵ Architecture must transcend its preoccupation with the precise delineations of form that focused vision picks up to pursue the gradations of scale and texture that underpin peripheral vision.
3. *Ambiguity*: Layering of space to allow multiple perceptions.
4. *Stillness*: Crafting a building to evoke in its details the spirit that characterizes the whole, so that the building achieves stillness by expressing the same spirit whichever way the body or gaze moves.
5. *Liminal Space*: Space that steps away from the compulsions of time and purpose that can overwhelm primary space.
6. *Unboundedness*: Using nature, light, contextual interlock, and the rescaling of depth at the edges of a project so that it connects with life beyond itself.
7. *Experience Maps*: Annotating the spaces of a *parti* in terms of qualitative experiences rather than functional labels.
8. *Memory and Inhabitation*: Design to facilitate the construction of memory through experience so that meaning accrues over time: an *aesthetic of absorption* as opposed to the *aesthetic of expression* that preoccupies most architects.

The Practice as a Garden

Satyagraha communes with the unmeasurable within us and our world, so a design practice founded on it is not a space amenable to detailed control. It must be envisioned like a garden whose inherent life can, at most, be lovingly nurtured in a quest toward alignment with our authenticity. The revelations of satyagraha and their translation into pattern are neither rapid nor linear. Rigorous daily practice must gradually absorb them into embodied consciousness with much forbearance needed for consequent mastery of the poetic unmeasurable. As the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, said,

*“And still, it is not enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many, and one must have the great patience to wait until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not until they have turned to blood within us, to glance, to gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves — not until then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them.”*¹⁶

¹⁵ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, England: John Wiley and Sons, 2005).

¹⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 14.