PEOPLE USED TO CATCH flies by using a “fly-bottle.” A conical glass bottle would lure flies with sweet sugar, and then, trapped in the twists in the glass, the fly would be stuck. The 20th Century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once described the purpose of philosophy: “To show the fly out of the fly-bottle.” By this he meant that the problems and contradictions that occupy thought are often false problems, a way that language traps us in a “fly-bottle” of concepts. Here, it is the philosopher or thinker that is trapped in the bottle of puzzles, seduced into thinking that one day we will arrive at the final answer; instead we just buzz around, banging our head against the bottle. The purpose of philosophy is to let the fly out, to free us of concepts and paradoxes that keep us trapped. In this sense, good philosophy is a form of therapy, a method to heal us from ideas that keep us trapped or even sick.

This article begins by recognizing a subtle kind of conceptual sickness that can trap us in a rather complicated fly-bottle. This is the apparent problem of the separation between personal, “inner,” individual transformation and socio-political or “external,” structural transformation. I want to offer a way out of this particularly important but false problem. In this sense, this article is a form of therapy, aspiring towards healing, liberation, and inspiration through a shift in thought. This thought is also a practice, a collective practice that, in the Shambhala tradition, is called “creating enlightened society.”
Some form of therapy is required in order to respond effectively to the following questions: What practices are most directly and powerfully oriented towards the creation of a flourishing, sustainable, and economically just human society on this planet? What kinds of actions are summoned from us by the ecological, economic, psychological, and political crises of our times? What is to be done? In responding to these and other related questions, we may find answers in the “external” realm of direct political and ecological action, working to resist injustices, implement policies, engage in politics, or enact alternatives. Or, we may find answers in the “internal” realm of spiritual training, mindfulness practices, yoga, or forms of psychotherapy.

Two Arrows Meeting in Mid-Air: Personal and Societal Transformation

There is no necessary contradiction between these two spheres of personal and social change. From ancient Greece and Confucian China to more present radicalizations of subjectivity, there is a long and robust history of ethical and political philosophy that assumes the interrelationship between the sense of self and politics. Critical theories such as the Frankfurt school, the historical-philosophical studies of Michel Foucault, recent works by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and the philosophy of Alain Badiou each locate subjectivity as central to socio-political power. There is a now well-established tradition of “engaged Buddhism,” “deep ecology,” “sacred activism,” and other
movements that explicitly bring together personal and social-ecological transformations.\textsuperscript{5} It may be intuitive that the forms of change needed in our world include both shifts in our own personal experience, as well as transformations of governmental institutions, financial systems, and ecological practices. At first, before we think too hard, we may already know that whatever we mean by a “better world” means something that includes our state of mind as well as the state of politics, economics, sustainability, and the cultures in which we live. There is a link between the two states.

However, as soon as we try to explain precisely how this works, how changes in our state of mind impact the “world out there,” we may falter. How, exactly, does becoming more peaceful, mindful, and wise make the world more peaceful, mindful, and wise? Through changes in one’s consciousness—through meditative, psychological, or spiritual self-cultivation—one may arrive at personal well being, but how does this impact institutionalized poverty and racism, ecological destruction, climate disruption, and political complacency? With the intensifying acceleration of climate change and the repetitions of the same fossil fuel addictions that created the situation in the first place, there is a sense of urgency. We may not be able to wait for the whole world to first make an internal shift in consciousness, and only secondarily begin to change systemic and concrete behaviors. At the same time, we cannot ignore the shifts in consciousness and pedagogies needed to change such behaviors. The forms of action required have to be more immediate, and may need a different understanding of how personal experience is conjoined with the socio-economic and political spheres.

Grace Lee Boggs, the ninety-nine-year-old Chinese-American activist who has been part of almost every major civil and human rights movement in the United States for the past seventy years, writes: “We believe in combining spiritual growth and awakening with practical actions in our daily lives.”\textsuperscript{6}

There are other points of connection between so-called inner well-being and outer engagement. Activists and community organizers are often concerned about their own state of mind and emotional health while on the front lines of ecological action, social work, and political efforts. A common issue within social service, activist communities, and NGOs is the experience of “burnout,” stress, and despair that arises when directly facing extreme poverty, violence, or political gridlock.\textsuperscript{7} Over the past decades, many former activists have turned towards Buddhism and other forms of contemplative training in order
to develop personal peace and resilience. For some, strengthened emotional resources lead to strengthened activism; for others, the path of self-cultivation may replace their previous activist vocations.

In modern society, there is a rapidly growing search for contemplative practices and information for working with the mind. It seems as if conditions of modern life demand modes of inner training that have not been a large part of how we educate people in the contemporary world. Though an old term in Buddhist meditation traditions as well as a word in Western thought, “mindfulness” has taken on new meanings during the past decades. As early as 1976, the Tibetan meditation teacher Chögyam Trungpa began to teach a secular form of mindfulness-awareness meditation in Shambhala Training, a series of workshops open to people from any religious background. Mindfulness has now emerged as the leading example of a secular, non-religious system of meditation practice, in large part due to empirical studies linking medical and emotional health with stress-reduction techniques. According to medical psychologist and mindfulness researcher Daniel Siegel, “Research on some dimensions of mindful awareness practices reveals that they greatly enhance the body’s functioning: Healing, immune response, stress reactivity, and a general sense of physical well-being are improved with mindfulness.”

Over 720 different institutions such as hospitals, schools, prisons, and even the U.S. military rely on programs influenced by Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). The work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Mirabai Bush, and other pioneers opened up new directions for the interface between meditation, medicine, Buddhism, science, and society. Publications on mindfulness have grown almost exponentially in the past two decades. Encouraged by the Dalai Lama, the Mind and Life Institute continues its mission to “build a scientific understanding of the mind to reduce suffering and promote well-being.” Global leaders in business, government, and science, as well as activists and social visionaries, are turning inwards, exploring the benefits of mindfulness, yoga, and other techniques. Conferences in major research universities are bringing together cognitive scientists and meditators to learn more about neurobiology. Corporate leaders are looking for an inner state of being that can help them achieve organizational flexibility. There is a thirst for the mindful techniques that have been passed down in the great meditative and spiritual traditions.

On the other side, many spiritual and religious leaders are increasingly inspired to be more engaged—to do something to acknowledge and transform climate change, poverty, and structural injustices in our
economy. Many modern Buddhists and yoga practitioners are dissatisfied with simply addressing inner psychological or spiritual needs and often ask about the most skillful ways to intervene in political and ecological struggles. There are longstanding movements such as engaged Buddhism, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and various Zen activists groups to “get off the cushion” or “off the mat” and into society. New communities are emerging, such as the Interdependence Project—which joins together secular Buddhism, contemplative arts, and activism—and Transformative Change, which “bridges the inner and outer lives of social change agents, activists and allies to support a more effective, more sustainable movement of social justice for all.”

The business-, organizational-, and politically-oriented are turning inward, and the inward-looking are turning outward. Like two arrows meeting in mid air, the courses of contemplative and socially engaged wisdom are converging out of necessity.

Many who are interested in contemplative training such as meditation and yoga genuinely want to believe that changes in inner experience are relevant for broader global issues. At the same time there are questions: “As I meditate and feel personal well-being, or as I experience my own basic goodness, am I not ignoring the larger structural and ecological issues?” Or, “I feel privileged to be able to meditate while so many people are suffering and while economic demands encourage the slashing and burning of rainforests; instead of working on my self, shouldn’t I be ‘out there’ helping the world?” It may be possible that meditation could become an “opiate of the masses”; while an elite group creates inner peace, material conditions continue to create climate disruption, violence, and rising income inequality, and the inner peace does not seem to affect these concrete conditions.

Three Possible Responses

At least three possible responses to such challenges have their own validity, and each plays a role in broad movements such as engaged Buddhism. First, we could respond by emphasizing the inter-subjective aspects of spiritual training. As we meditate, we also cultivate an increasing sense of interconnection and compassion. Many forms of contemplative training, especially those influenced by Buddhist traditions, emphasize the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion for others. They also describe trainings in ethical action such as the 6 Perfect Actions (Pāramitās). Shambhala teachings emphasize being a
“warrior in the world,” training to be engaged and to make a difference in society.

The ability not only to empathize but also to listen and communicate genuinely links inner training in compassion to dialogical political practices, such as Habermas’s discourse ethics in the social sphere. Recent practices and writings by Sakyong Mipham, the lead teacher of the Shambhala tradition, emphasize dialogue as interpersonal training. Related insight dialogue techniques, such as those developed by Gregory Kramer, combine the tradition of dialogue work with Buddhist insight teachings. In these forms of practice, “inner” spiritual training breaks out of the membrane of an isolated and separate sense of self and extends into the world of relationship and society. There are productive possibilities in analyzing the ways in which personal, contemplative training in generating compassion could support such discourse ethics. While I am strongly in favor of such future research and modes of practice—especially for building communities of communication—it is unclear whether even remarkably successful methods of discourse coupled with individual training would effectively respond to the economic and ecological crises of the present.

A second possible response to the challenge of articulating how personal transformation leads to social transformation would be to call attention to concrete individual choices and actions that arise from contemplative and mindful training. Here the idea would be that as individuals become more emotionally stable and aware, and less greedy and attached, various ethical life choices would naturally flow forth. For example, individuals may be completely embedded in consumer culture, unaware of the ecological impact of their actions, but through personal contemplative training, they would begin to become more aware of their impact. They would begin to make healthier consumer decisions, buy less, drive eco-friendly cars, etc. While there are certainly examples of such shifts in personal choice and behavior, it does not seem as if such shifts are either inevitable or even common. Though I know of no empirical data on the subject, I have not personally witnessed much of a shift in the actual consumer choices or personal actions of long-time meditators, for example. In part this has to do with the fact that such choices are not often explicitly suggested in many meditation courses, retreats, and webinars, though there are other factors involved. But even if consumer choice and ecological impact were major facets of modern spiritual trainings, and even if every single meditator and yoga practitioner significantly reduced their amount of
waste and consumption, it is not clear whether such shifts in personal choice would have a significant impact on our current ecological trajectory, for example.\textsuperscript{20} This certainly does not mean that such choices are irrelevant or unhelpful, but that they may not be sufficient. Other modes of collective practice are required.

Third, we could respond to the relationship between personal and collective through a sense of scale. What may begin as individuals meditating or working on their own state of awareness could strengthen through community and an increase in numbers. It is imagined that if more and more people turn to forms of mindful self-cultivation and become healthier, more compassionate, and more ethical, then they will eventually have a significant political voice and influence on the culture sphere. A related model is that if more leaders or employees in a given organization or corporation become increasingly aware and ethically-motivated, they will infiltrate their corporation and transform its decisions and methods of self-organization from within. Although there are examples of such situations,\textsuperscript{21} in order for such potential political or ecological impact to be more probable, there would need to be some diagnoses of current socio-political and economic issues, as well as some visions of either resistance or alternative practices, or various political possibilities, all of which seem absent from many generalized forms of contemporary spiritual practice or contemplative management discourse. Included within these three possible responses are deeper and more patient modes of cultural transformation, such as the impact of personal training on the ability to be a loving and supportive parent, which, over time, could have a significant impact on the evolution of a culture.

Although all three of these responses—interpersonal elements, life choices, and scale—are important, valid, and likely essential for any future conceptualization of the continuum between personal and the structural change, they are limited. One limitation is the narrow understanding of “practices” in the first place. Spiritual practices, such as meditation or generating compassion, are often understood to be “internal” and disconnected from society, and therefore need to be connected to the “societal” sphere. This can lead to a sense of delayed timing implied in these models: first, one develops contemplative mastery in the inner sphere, and then only secondarily, one enacts a certain manifestation in the external world of relationships, community, actions, and politics.\textsuperscript{22} This secondary, ethical action is optional, and only for those who are “activists.” Contemplative training is “applied”
to a range of possible aspects of society (such as medicine, business, etc.) rather than already understood to be part of social and historical conditions.

Another way in which to reveal the limitations of the three responses above is to explore the detail and sophistication of the “internal” part of the equation as compared to the “external” part. Drawing on established sources such as Buddhist ethical self-cultivation or Patañjali’s yogic writings, or perhaps even drawing upon Aristotelian virtue ethics, various modern spiritual-social practices tend to have sophisticated methods of contemplative psychological training. Meditation traditions combine centuries of epistemological, ontological, and ethical reflection with concrete soteriological practices. There are numerous techniques for stabilizing attention, cultivating equanimity, generating compassion, transforming anger and attachment, and learning to see with insight. Yet when it comes to the ways in which such inner trainings manifest socially, politically, or ecologically, the actual methods are much less clear. In general, this points to the largely “idealistic” tendency of many modern interpretations of contemplative social engagement. Idealist here refers to a perspective that emphasizes the “mind,” individual experience, and internal forces over concrete “material” forces and collective engagement. Spiritual practices are conceived as beginning with personal, inner experience, which subsequently, they may extend out in various ways into forms of manifest action. There is an assumed metaphysics in which mind comes first, and the outer world comes second.

Such a divided movement could close off the potential for spiritual practices to be simultaneously understood as socio-political. Instead of viewing spiritual practice as exclusively located in the “inner,” we need to discover the ways in which practices are always socially embedded. If properly conceived and engaged in this way, to practice a contemplative exercise could itself be a revolutionary act, helping to overcome the division between inner and outer, and clarifying how social influences are significant factors in spiritual training. In order for spiritual practices to be thoroughly interdependent with the socio-political sphere, we need to liberate our conception of practices from the exclusively internal sphere and to see practice as already socio-political. Economic institutions, political discourse, the impact of corporations on the ecosystem, and the formation of subjectivity all emerge in a field of practices. The remainder of this article makes this point explicitly.
It is difficult to imagine a radical re-orientation of any society without simultaneously imagining a shift in the personal experience of members of that society. Though we may successfully transform economic and political structures, if the people, their mental conceptions of reality, and their everyday experiences do not also transform, it is likely that the change will be incomplete. According to cultural geographer David Harvey, there are seven spheres of activity that are always mutually interacting in the dialectic of historical change: (1) technologies and organizational forms, (2) social relations, (3) institutional and administrative arrangements, (4) production and labor processes, (5) relations to nature, (6) the reproduction of daily life, and (7) mental conceptions of reality. All of these spheres are mutually conditioning and need to be considered in a theory of change. For example, if we are hypothetically concerned with the impacts of consumer culture on the biosphere, we may successfully implement policies that reduce the amount of consumption and waste. However, if we have not addressed the everyday practices and mental attitudes that thrive in a culture of consumption, it is most probable that the new policies will be overwhelmed by the sheer momentum of previous, habitual ways of thinking and acting. Michel Foucault made a similar point when he stated, “Nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed.” Replacing or reworking the institutions and structures of a society while ignoring the “minute” and “everyday” level of human experience may not lead to lasting transformations. Yet simply attending to the mental conceptions of reality will not lead to complete transformation either. The personal level and the structural level intertwine. We need shifts in consciousness and everyday life as much as shifts in structure.

However, the intuitive connection between the personal and the societal does not necessarily lead to a clear path forward. Instead of imagining a fluid and interdependent relationship between transformations in subjectivity—such as shifts in psychological experience, identity, and knowledge—on the one hand, and shifts in socio-economic and political circumstances, on the other, we may be led to imagine a situation in which we must first make “inner” change and then subsequently enact “external” structural change. The relationship between spiritual, inner transformation and social transformation is under-theorized and often misunderstood within the present. Despite the claim and the hope that personal transformations are relevant for
global issues, it is unclear precisely why this is the case. Further, many practitioners of mindfulness, yoga, and other forms of spirituality do not share a “common language” or perspective, let alone concrete strategies, for how their transformations in personal experience are part of a collective movement towards sustainability, social and economic justice, and thriving, healthy communities. There remains a subtle division between the internal and the external.

Structure, Agency, and Practices

The tension between the personal and the societal is akin to the important debate between structure and agency in academic sociology. Turning to these classical issues in sociology can be helpful to inform the relationship between personal and social transformation. The debate arises from a question directly relevant for the themes in this article: what is the primary sphere of social influence on human behavior—the “structural” norms, institutions, systems of production, and ideologies, or the “agency,” autonomy, free-will, and choices of individual actors? The structures of society can be understood as those objective or stable systems and norms that impinge upon, enable, and shape individuals. Agency refers to the capacity for those same individuals to determine, shape, and re-create their own experience, and potentially to influence the structures. For example, from the perspective of structure, each individual in modern society is influenced by the way the calendar is organized and the way schools, governments, businesses, virtual markets, transportation schedules, and other institutions adhere to this way of determining time. From the perspective of agency, individuals can make unique decisions to shape their own experience of time, make strategic choices, and even propose their own calendar. Sociologists have debated which pole of social experience is more central, often making causal or reductive arguments in favor of one side or another.

Since at least the influential writings of sociologist Talcott Parsons, there have been systematic attempts to overcome the distinction between these two social poles. Contemporary sociology often makes room for both agency and structure and tends to avoid social determinism—the view that agents are totally shaped by structural influence. Various theories proliferate as a response, such as a dialectic approach, interactionism, structuration theory, and attempts to transcend the very distinction between subjective and objective poles. One of the
most influential attempts to overcome the division between structure and agency has been to turn to a social theory of *practices*. Here, the concept of “practice” provides a new perspective through which to understand the interaction between society and individuals. As many in modern society become interested in “spiritual practices” such as mindfulness and yoga, it is important to begin to extend and deepen our conceptualization of what it means to practice something in the first place, and to see society itself as a set of practices.

**Society as a Practice**

What does it mean to see society as a set of practices? Here, we must broaden our understanding of practice to go beyond the idea of “practicing the piano” or “practicing meditation.” The English “practice” derives form the Greek *praxis* and can simply mean “doing” or “acting.” This common usage developed into a more precise meaning in Aristotle’s writings in the 4th century B.C. Practice is often first and foremost connected with ethics. Practical philosophy or practical reason is the capacity to contemplate real decisions about what to do in the world. For Aristotle, practical understanding is a variety of understanding which “controls deliberately chosen action, and so practical truth.”

Practical reason is often normative and ethico-political, engaging with questions of value and suggesting courses of action for individual moral deeds as well as for the decisions of a council, organization, city, or nation. During the enlightenment period, Immanuel Kant’s interpretation of “practical reason” moved ethics in the direction of universal rational reflection, whereas later, Marx intensified the political possibilities of *praxis* through the demand for world-changing action as the true purpose of philosophy: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” In an everyday sense, practice is also closely related to “practical,” which implies a sense of the mundane or down-to-earth: “let’s get practical here.”

Everyday actions such as how we move, the distance we stand from another person on a train, the way we pick up a fork and knife, our posture and choice of words in relation to our boss or teacher, how we relate with entertainment and media, how we exchange currency or vote, as well as specific rituals and habits—all are practices that make up the lived experience of being a human. Many of these practices are shared. For example, each society will have a very specific way of experiencing fashion and style. For some, fashions demarcate social class, for others, geographical location, for others, age groups or gender, etc.
There is also a different experience of time connected with fashion. For some societies, fashions remain the same for decades, for others fashions change each year or even each season. The shared experience of time is connected with the everyday act of getting dressed, purchasing clothing, and even desiring clothing. This is one specific example to show how much of social experience is connected with everyday, ordinary actions. Other examples include the shared rituals connected with political advertising campaigns, voting, and then inaugurating a prime minister or president. Financial exchange, trading, checking stock market numbers every hour, as well as systems of production and corporate organization are all shared practices. A group of people, no matter how dispersed or intimate, share a set of acts, procedures, technologies, and apparatuses, each of which have their own rules and logics. The experience of “the economy” or “time,” “fashion” or “politics” cannot be understood without such shared practices. In this sense, there is no solid thing called “the economy” or “politics” distinct from those practices. This view helps to make the social sphere more malleable.

Everyday life is a practice; society is made of practices. In The Sham-bhala Principle, Sakyong Mipham evokes a similar idea when he writes, “life is a ceremony.” Rather than seeing the world based on the view that an individual is a separate identity, persona, or internal “mind” and that there is a solid and established external social world “out there,” we can understand every human being as embedded in shared social practices which are themselves central to ongoing social structures.

Practice theorist Theodore Schatzki defines the practice approach as demarcating “all analyses that (1) develop an account of practices, either the field of practices or some subdomain thereof (e.g. science), or (2) treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter.” Among practice theorists, practices are the “fundamental social phenomena.” That is, we can locate discursive or embodied practices as primary in the construction of social experience. The ideas, values, and beliefs that seem unquestionable and true in a given society do not stand as solid truths, separate from practices. Rather, truths emerge from collective practices. As Denys Turner writes, “Where we used to say that our practices, for example in science, were justified by the fact that they led us to truth, now we can see that the truth is only that which our practices of representation enable us to construct as true.”
The influential French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu described practice as akin to “the feel for the game” of one immersed in the temporal flow of a game-field. “The most characteristic operations of [practice’s] ‘logic’—inverting, transferring, uniting, separating, etc.—take the form of bodily movements, turning to right or left, putting upside down, going in or coming out, tying or cutting etc. This logic… like all practices, can only be grasped in action.”

Individuals are socialized into the shared practices of their culture. We learn how to become a member of our society through learning certain linguistic and physical practices. The so-called “external” structures of society are “internally” learned by the dispositions and especially through the habits of the body: the “outer” becomes the “inner.” Through education and social inculcation, the external structures of society become “incorporated dispositions” of social actors.

Bourdieu described his philosophy of practice as relational—social action takes place in a field of relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions. Further, his philosophy of practice is dispositional—it is concerned with the “potentialities inscribed in the body of agents, and in the structure of the situations where they act.” These dispositions are the “body schema” which are “capable of ordering practices in a way that is at once unconscious and systematic.”

Bourdieu’s most famous term is habitus. He defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions… principles which generate and organize practices…” Important for our purposes is the “two-way relationship” between objective structures or social fields, on the one hand, and the incorporated structures of those social fields in the habitus. Agents internalize structural dispositions, but also externalize actions that influence the social field. Nonetheless, Bourdieu has been criticized for overemphasizing the influence of structure and inculcation. For example, Michel de Certeau calls attention to the ways in which actors make strategic choices to push back against structures and highlights our ability to maneuver within the conditions established by structures. He notices how people navigating a modern city sometimes choose different routes than the most direct, cheapest, or most expedient path, or how the selection of various commodities defies certain economic logics. Through attending to strategic and tactical practices of agents, de Certeau points to an immense ocean of alternative practices that are available to us in everyday action. Working through
the dynamic relationship between individual and society, practice theorists attempt to overcome the division between structure and agency.

Our interest here is in the relationship between the social field and the incorporated structures, and how this relationship is maintained and replicated, as well as transformed. Simply collapsing self into society will lose part of the equation, and reducing society to simply the sum-total of individual actors will miss the complexity of the relation between structure and agent. It is in the relation that we could discover more about the inherent connection between personal practices and social transformation. Our sense of self and our body, as well as the shared structures of the broader social milieu, are systems that organize practices. In other words, both the self and society are practiced together.

Self as a Practice

Just as we can see society as an ongoing set of practices, our sense of self is also constituted through practices. It is limiting to assume that human beings are first and foremost isolated minds, separate from the world. We need to question the very division between internal-self and external-society. “Cartesianism” (the early-modern philosophy of Rene Descartes) is the term for the prominent but misleading approach that sees humans as “internal thinking minds.” From this perspective, human beings are understood as rational, thinking, cogitos, who perceive the world “out there” is represented in our heads through concepts, images, and words. Philosophy has to then describe how such an agent, locked inside their head, can make contact with their world. This understanding of the human mind is one source of the confusion that sees the realm of personal transformation as distinct from social transformation. The idea that “spiritual practices” refer to the “inner domain,” whereas social transformation refers to an “external domain” can be connected with this Cartesian worldview. Overcoming this false understanding of the self as internal and independent will be central to opening up new understandings of socially transformative practice.

As an alternative to such a perspective, we can understand the sense of self as emerging from within a field of social practices. Our identity and experience of being human is, at least in part, constructed through our everyday practices from infancy through adulthood. What it means to be human must extend beyond the (thinking and even feeling) inner dimension and connect with the world, blurring the division
between inner and outer. Again, it is a theory of practices that can help overcome this division.

An increasingly influential philosophy of “background practices” emphasizes the priority of engaged practice. The “practices into which we are socialized provide the conditions necessary for people to pick out objects, to understand themselves as subjects, and generally to make sense of their worlds and of their lives.” For practice theorists, Martin Heidegger is understood as one of the important 20th Century philosophers who helped move thinking beyond rationalist or cognitivist tendencies and towards a view of being human as actively involved with the world. Heidegger offered a phenomenology of being-in-the-world in which agents are always engaged with their world, connected with their social world. Heidegger worked “to recover an understanding of the agent as engaged, as embedded in a culture, a form of life, a “world” of involvements.” Such involvements are the “background practices” that shape both the individual experiences of the self and the social experiences of a collective.

We can see also numerous examples of an emerging conception of subjectivity that understands what it means to be a human as fundamentally a being who is responsible for practicing their self into existence. The basis of this perspective is to understand the human as a doer, or a practitioner. Cognitive philosopher Alva Nöe writes in Out of Our Heads:

> Consciousness is not something that happens inside us. It is something we do or make. Better: it is something we achieve. Consciousness is more like dancing than it is like digestion… This is what a genuinely biological approach to the study of mind and human nature teaches us. The idea that the only genuinely scientific study of consciousness would be one that identifies consciousness with events in the nervous system is a bit of outdated reductionism.

One implication for human agents is that we are intentionally self-cultivating organisms. This picture of the human as self-practicing is visible especially in neurobiology, which, incidentally, is increasingly the field in which Buddhist meditation traditions are publicly understood. We could look to one example of this sense of self-practice within the emerging conceptualization of the brain as “plastic.” In the past, the brain was understood to be a rather unmoving and deterministic hunk of flesh. It was thought that you are born with your type of brain and the particular way it was configured and “hard-wired,” and then
you are stuck with this brain for the rest of your life. Unfolding neurological research now reveals that the brain re-invents itself, changes, and evolves throughout life. Plasticity is the term for the capacity for modulation, change, and repair within the brain.

One of the major characteristics of the nervous system is, without a doubt, plasticity. The brain cannot be considered to be a network of permanently established cables… We can assume that every day new fibers are growing, synapses are becoming undone, and new ones are being formed. These changes in the neuronal landscape mark our capacity for adaptation, our capacity for learning and improvement, which continue until an advanced age, in fact until death.48

Our brains are alive and changing, adapting to lived experience, and this adaptation is in part due to modes of self-training, repetition, and habituation—or one could say practice. As French philosopher Catherine Malabou writes, “our brain is in part essentially what we do with it…. the brain is a self-cultivating organ.”49 Linking this view of the brain with Marx’s understanding of historical-political becoming, Malabou writes, “The brain is a work and we do not know it. We are subjects—authors and products at once—and we do not know it…. Humans make their own brains, but they do not know that they make it.”50 Our synaptic connections and neural networks transform themselves, in part, through repetitive activity. The human being, and especially our brain, may be understood as something that biologically and materially comes into being through practice of the self.

In a very different way, Michel Foucault also called attention to the ways in which the sense of self is “practiced” through what he called, “practices of the self.” Through our various practices of trying to know and understand our self, to stay healthy, to come to know truth, and to assess if we are “good,” moral, or wise, we create a sense of self. Our “self” only arises through these practices. For example, Foucault looked at the Christian practice of confession as a way in which members of Christian societies came to know themselves. Through the very practice of confession, a certain identity and practice of selfhood arose. In The Care of the Self, Foucault outlined “practices of the self”: medical procedures, anatomy, regimens of pleasure, and sexual askēsis are practices or “technologies of the self.” Foucault defines technologies of the self, at one point, as “techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies,
their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and in this manner so as to transform themselves.”

Though Foucault’s interest in technologies of the self is often celebrated as affirming the methods of philosophical self-transformation in antiquity, it is also clear that Foucault was ambivalent about such practices of the self. Especially in modernity, they can and often have been used to inflict disciplinary regimes of subjectivization upon their practitioners through the practices themselves. Foucault’s concern with practices of the self is located within his subtle examinations of the ways human lives become subject to disciplines, institutions, and biopolitical determination through modes of self-formation. Foucault looked at medical and psychological practices such as how we define people who are sane or insane, methods of imprisonment and punishment, as well as knowledge practices in the sciences. In each case, we can see ways in which the sense of self is enacted through practices—for Foucault, political power is not just something oppressive that comes from “outside” of us and represses us. Rather, political power is productive and creative, and it functions in our own relationship with our self and our everyday practices.

The notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law that says no—power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. Now, I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one that has been curiously widespread. If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think that one would obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body.

Before Foucault, “power” was often understood as a force concentrated in the State or a tyrant or a specific institution; after Foucault, power is seen to be everywhere, down to the smallest everyday and bodily practices. Foucault called attention to the ways in which power is often enacted or practiced by people in their own gestures, discourse, and bodies. In particular, he traced how older monarchical and Machi-
avellian models of power have become pushed down into the governance and administration of modern democratic societies, so that now new techniques of control operate through our own everyday practices—we govern, control, and produce our selves.

Foucault’s concern with practices of the self is ultimately part of a critical project through which we discover new practices of freedom. Foucault was seeking spiritual exercises and practices of the self that could express human freedom and pleasure, not just self-entrapment in consumer society. To “care for the self” can either be an act of self-limiting subjectivization or a practice of freedom. What makes the difference? How do we discover practices of the self that are techniques of freedom for both self and social practices?

Because these practice-theories can be rather abstract, it will be helpful to go in-depth into a specific example that crosses between individual and societal practices. The experience of time provides such a relevant and timely example.

Time-Compression as a Social Practice

In 1964, one front cover of Time magazine read, “Americans Now Face a Glut of Leisure—The Task Ahead: How to Take Life Easy.” Due to technological developments and automation, it was imagined that future people (like us) would have less and less work to do, leaving open unprecedented amounts of free time. The idea was something like this: while in the past, we had to make things from scratch, or wait for many days for the mail to circulate a letter, or wait to bring a photograph to a professional to be developed, there would come a time in the future in which material goods would be created by robots, prepared food would be warmed in a microwave, letters would be sent through the Internet, and a photograph could be taken instantly with your hand-held mobile device. Such time-saving devices and social practices would change the world, leaving open massive stores of time for leisure. From the time of the industrial revolution, it seems that prophets of modernity predicted the coming challenge of having little labor to perform. Economic and technological efficiency would lead to an experience of human idleness and freedom.

Despite the ironic name of Time magazine, it seems that these temporal predictions have been completely wrong. One of the marks of modernity is the compression and acceleration of time. The very conditions that were once imagined to be the future source of free time—
such as technological developments and the Internet—now seem to demand increasing amounts of our time. For many, the practices of everyday life create constant pressures to be productive, to squeeze as much value or capital from each second as possible, to meet ever-growing deadlines, to be efficient, to respond to emails in which each single email turns into five, and to multitask while racing from work or school to family time. There seems to be more to do in each day than the amount of time available, and more that we want out of our life than can be squeezed into the limited time we have on this planet. There may not seem to be time for what may matter most—for the arts, for family, for relationship, for contemplation, for community. Tasks must be given a value, and what does not make the schedule falls away into that pile of things for which we do not have time. Social theorist of time Hartmut Rosa quotes a German playwright as stating, “I’m actually a quite different person, I just never got around to being him.”

We are pushed and pulled in contemporary consumer culture—even though we think we are free. And this entrapping confusion is rapidly changing not just the pace of our lives and families, schools and workplaces, but the very planet that we are a part of. As we collectively race to be more productive, this has concrete impacts on the amount of fossil fuel we use, the waste we produce, and the carbon that we release into the atmosphere.

One of the values of exploring the experience of time is that it cuts across the line between agency and structure, or the experience of “inner” human agents and the “external” socio-cultural practices that impinge upon autonomous action. Time is both a “macrosociological” phenomena present in whole systems while simultaneously a “microsociological” phenomenon, present in the viewpoint of individuals. We experience time as a personal phenomenon. Individual practices, family influences, and skill also lead to different experiences of time—some of us manage time well, others procrastinate and always feel behind; some are always stressed and others are more at ease, etc. In this sense, time is a personal experience. But time is also established through social and economic practices that go beyond the individual. For example, changes in the timing of communication technologies such as the cell phone and email, production techniques, transportation infrastructure, and even the tempo of seasonal fashion lead to changes in the experience of time. Such transformations are not dictated or controlled by individuals, but are part of societal structures that can feel as if they impinge
upon individuals; at the same time, they are practiced, chosen, and even valued by individual agents.

History of Acceleration Practices

There is a history to our times. As cultural geographer and economic theorist David Harvey discusses, the experience of time has changed throughout the process of modernization. Harvey refers to “time-and-space compression” as the processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves. I use the word compression because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by the speed-up in the pace of life. 

Experiences of time are not constant; rather they emerge through the changing practices of social life. As we say, “Time flies when you’re having fun,” implying that the experience of time is conditioned by the activities in which we engage. Time is created through social practices. The experience of time in a rushed city and the experience of time in a relaxed suburb are qualitatively different. We could say that the way we practice time changes in each situation.

When we think of practices such as meditation or shared economic or production practices, we may imagine them taking place within time, as if time were a pre-established container or constant in which practices take place. However, practices should also be understood to “create” time in the sense that the actual doing of certain actions create different conditions for temporality. Doing certain activities, especially when doing them with others, speeds up or slows down time. In The Timespace of Human Activity, sociologist and practice theorist Theodore Schatzski writes,

When I write that activity is a spatiotemporal event… I do not mean that activity occurs in time and in space… I mean instead that time and space are inherently related constitutive dimensions of action and the happening of action in the opening—or coming to be—of those dimensions: of time and space. Activity is a temporalspatial event in the sense that it is in the occurrence of activity that timespace comes to be.
Further, there are different and competing experiences and *practices* of time overlapping in our society. There is “family time,” which has its own tempo; “industrial time,” which is connected to “the restless search for capital accumulation”; there is “cyclical time,” which is connected with seasonal patterns or lifecycles of birth, aging, and death; there is “epochal time,” in which we understand our age in relation to human history; there is “free time,” in which we schedule unscheduled periods of time, etc. Many of these experiences of time are created through the social practices (family meals, labor, yoga class, funerals, etc.) we engage in during that period. Our experience of time changes through changes in our practices. These “times” are often in contradiction with each other, and differences in time-values impact many of the political and ecological choices that mark our age. David Harvey writes:

> Out of such different senses of time, serious conflicts can arise: should the optimal rate of the exploitation of a resource be set by the interest rate, or should we search, as environmentalists insist, for a sustainable development which assures the perpetuation of the ecological conditions suitable for human life into an indefinite future?  

In addition, time has a history. The experience of time has changed over the centuries, and especially since the time of modernity. Different cultures, different centuries, and different social practices have different experiences of time: “Each distinctive mode of production or social formation will, in short, embody a distinctive bundle of time and space practices and concepts.” In particular, changes in socio-economic practices have shaped our modern experience of time: “Progressive monetization of relations in social life transforms the qualities of time.” Harvey gives the example of the way time was divided and experienced at the end of the medieval period in Europe with the rise of the merchant class:

> The medieval merchants, for example, in constructing a better measurement of time, ‘for the orderly conduct of business’ promoted ‘a fundamental change in the measurement of time, which was indeed a change in time itself.’ Symbolized by clocks and bells that called workers to labour and merchants to market, separated from the ‘natural rhythms of agrarian life,’ and divorced from religious significations, merchants and masters created a new ‘chronological net’ in which daily life was caught.
In this example we see, firstly, how the social experience of time is shaped by the concrete everyday practices of a society, such as the use of clocks and bells and the standardization of techniques for measuring time. Secondly, we can see how the personal experience of time is influenced by shared social practices, thus linking “inner” experience with broader structural practices. Thirdly, we can see how economic concerns actually shape the experience of time. Of course, this process, which began in the transition from medieval times to the enlightenment, modernity, and the industrial revolution, has accelerated exponentially. As the success of trading and production has become central to our society, time has sped up.

Through changing economic and social practices, time itself has become a commodity. Efficiency is one of the hallmarks of successful capitalist production. “Turnover time” refers to the rate in which money and products can be transformed into profit. “There is an omnipresent incentive for individual capitalists to accelerate their turnover time vis-à-vis the social average, and in so doing to promote a social trend towards faster average turnover times.” In other words, a good business is able to speed up the pace at which profits are created, outcompeting others. Searching for better and faster technologies, automation, and innovations allows for such efficiency. There has been a “continuous effort to shorten turnover times, thereby speeding up social processes while reducing the time horizons of meaningful decision-making.”

Since at least the 1970s, even the high-speed production methods of the Fordist years have given way to more rapid techniques of production. The capacity to produce small amounts of goods in cheap, small batches, linked directly to the demand of consumers, triumphed over large production lines. Rather than having to store stocks, industries developed the “just-in-time inventory flows delivery system.” New techniques of organization, such as hiring temporary sub-contractors that could be fired when their purpose had ended, allowed corporations to speed up turnover time and profits. New systems of management broke down older hierarchies and demanded the self-organization and self-motivation of workers, creating a culture of high-speed work that valued new levels of efficiency and productivity. The end result is that workers have not seen a reduction in labor time, but often a huge increase in the hours expected in order to maintain employment. New labor practices of the self have therefore transformed
the sense of being a human: our sense of self changes when practices change and accelerate.

Such shifts in production and organization were directly linked to new forms of flexible accumulation and trade. New systems of virtual, high-frequency trading, for example, have emerged since they were permitted in 1998. “The ability to gain a slight edge in the number of transactions per second or the speed at which the algorithms in one’s computer program can process information and switch trading strategies can mean tens of billions of dollars in annual profits.” Such trading speeds connect with the need for faster flows of information for traders and businesses, putting pressure on technology developers to ever-increase access to information, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They also connect with the demand for productivity and labor-hours in response to the need for information showing fast, continual growth and increased profits.

Helmut Rosa helpfully distinguishes between three interrelated dimensions of acceleration: technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. Technical acceleration refers to the introduction of new technologies and the respective acceleration that occurs in a society when these new gadgets reduce the time needed to accomplish a certain activity. For example, societies change when the automobile becomes a common household possession, and societies speed up even more through the digital revolution. Second, the acceleration of social change refers to the rate at which a society itself changes. New ideas, new institutions, new forms of entertainment, and gaps between the experiences of generations all mark accelerated rates of social change. Third, the pace of life refers to the personal experience of time. As technological practices and the ways individuals must be socialized speed up, the pace of life also speeds up. There is a sense of a “contraction of the present,” in which expectations for what we accomplish, produce, and achieve in each day accelerate. Technological acceleration drives faster social change, which pushes and intensifies the pace of life. Then, when social change and the pace of life speed up, there is greater demand for technologies that can help reduce lag-times in productivity and information flows, forming a vicious circle of demands for increasing speed. The combination of all three leads to a “self-reinforcing spiral of acceleration,” leading to the “widespread sensation of stress and lack of time.” As Rosa summarizes, “in the modern world social acceleration has become a self-propelling process.”
On the level of the average person, the use of hand-held devices, faster social media, and emerging means of instant communication are everyday practices that accelerate our experience of time. A constant barrage of newer and better products and increasing demands for efficiency are needed in order to maintain growth in profits. Products with a limited use-life have become particularly profitable, so that creating new models of cell phones and computers every few years replaces the ideal of a product that will last for decades, which affects how we save money and consume and even how we desire. Such everyday practices are linked to the acceleration of industrial and trading practices. Students in schools are expected to process more information at faster rates; artists and authors need to produce creative works under different time constraints; families must reduce the amount of time together in order to prioritize the demands for productivity; and throughout society, we feel that we must increase the speed and efficiency of our labor time, even as jobs decrease in many industrialized nations. The end result is an accelerating society.

These social practices lead to further accelerations of society and to a culture of competition and excitation. Of course, we can appreciate the creativity and vitality of such productivity, and some of us thrive on the speed. Yet we could also recognize ours as a culture literally addicted to the excessive repetitions of productivity and work. According to Italian philosopher and political theorist, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi:

Working so much has implied an abandonment of vital social functions, and a commodification of language, affections, teaching, therapy, and self-care. Society does not need more work, more jobs, more competition. On the contrary: we need a massive reduction in work-time, a prodigious liberation of life from the social factory, in order to re-weave the fabric of the social relation. [This will] enable a huge release of energy for social tasks that can no longer be conceived as a part of the economy and should once again become forms of life... Now we need to allow people to release their knowledge, intelligence, affects. This is today’s wealth, not compulsive useless labor.70

The ideology of current forms of accelerated capitalism values competition and individualism, and those values arise in the practices and pace of everyday life, such as digital and mobile practices. We become habituated to cycles of work, information flows, and speeds that are practiced in the subjectivity and lives of actors. Any theory of trans-
formation must include ways to transform such practices, ideologies, and subjectivities. Importantly, according to Berardi, we are entering a phase where we must engage in a therapy for our civilization, healing this addiction to acceleration, in order to help with the trauma and loss as the high-speed social factory that has defined the past decades begins to collapse. But for now, the practices that make up our current experience of time construct the sense of rush and pressure common to modern forms of suffering, psychological illness, and poor health.

Stress, Time, and Social Transformation

We live in a stressed and pressurized culture. There is a connection between stress and anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental illness. Stress is now understood as a leading cause of heart disease, chromosomal deterioration, and reduced immune strength. As noted earlier, over the past three decades, modern societies, especially in Europe and the United States, have witnessed a surge of interest in mindful stress-reduction techniques. The growth in popularity of yoga is also linked to its promise of relaxation and the corresponding health benefits. It seems as if individuals have taken it upon themselves to learn to cope with and reduce stress, turning to various adaptations of older contemplative practices.

The unstated therapeutic assumption is that the effective point of intervention is in the individual mental-emotional space. Techniques of self-modulation such as breathing and shifts in awareness can reduce stress, and the history of human practices of self-cultivation is rich with methods effective for stabilizing, strengthening, and calming awareness. However effective, though, we must ask whether individual minds are the only place in which we can and should transform our culture’s relationship with stress. If time compression is at least in part the result of transformations in social and economic practices, then how are we to respond to and influence such practices?

It is clear from our explorations of social-time practices that the causes of stress include both the personal and social, inner and outer, agency and structure. Therefore, addressing just one pole of human experience—the inner dimension—cannot be a complete response to the actual conditions that cause stressful accelerations in the pace of life. We are called to explore transformations in collective socio-economic practices. We cannot simply transform our minds or our personal experience, for we will still subject ourselves to the practices that
cause stress in the first place. Even if we are able to vastly improve our mental health through meditation, we will ignore the countless social practices, technologies, production and monetary techniques, and modes of temporal organization that create our experiences of time in the modern world. We will also ignore the tremendous suffering of the countless people who do not live within the socio-economic conditions that give access to such meditation training, and who often experience the worst social impacts of our current systems, such as lack of good health care, education funding, and safety from violence. Further, we will ignore the ecological impacts of a racing, consuming, and waste-producing society. And—even if our concern is solely to effectively and thoroughly respond to mental-emotional well-being—the material presented in this article suggests the need to include society in our practices of transformation.

Practicing Society

Practices of freedom are not just about reducing personal stress or discovering inner peace; they will lead us to inquire into the broader social practices in which our very sense of self arises. This reveals the inseparability of the personal and social; spirituality, mindfulness, yoga, and meditation have to find a way to work with the social practices in which we are immersed.

A classic understanding of society from the academic discipline of sociology refers to “self-sufficiency.” Sociologist Talcott Parsons described society in this way:

A society does have to provide a repertoire of [opportunities] sufficient for individuals to meet their fundamental personal exigencies at all stages of the life cycle without going outside the society, and for the society itself to meet its own exigencies.73

A society is, ideally, complete; it meets the basic needs of its members. What does this mean for a vision of a flourishing, just, and sustainable society, or even a so-called “enlightened” society? In short, it may mean that enlightenment must include all of the aspects of a society; all of the shared practices and ways in which a society meets the needs of its members can also be practiced in a wakeful, compassionate, just, resilient way.
A society meets the needs of its members, at least in part, through social institutions. Such institutions include families and households; they meet the needs of giving birth to and nurturing new members of a society. There are also educational institutions that meet the needs of educating new members. There are health care and medical institutions that meet the needs of caring for sickness and health. There are markets and businesses that meet the needs for creating jobs. There are institutions such as research universities and scientific laboratories that meet the needs of knowledge production. There are institutions that create and enforce laws such as governments, judicial systems, prisons, and police forces. There are governments and militaries that meet the needs of “protecting” a society. There are economic systems that produce and exchange goods. There are also more subtle needs in a society to create value, meaning, entertainment, pleasure, and feelings of connection or belonging. Various institutions meet these needs, such as religions and media.

Such institutions create the basic structures of a society, and as we have seen, each institution also emerges from a set of shared practices. In order to work towards an “enlightened society,” our attention must include the practice of these institutions. Many of these institutions can generate ecological and psychological harm, and are part of the acceleration of society, for example. Is it possible for social institutions to practice differently? In *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, David Loy asks, “can corporations become enlightened?”

There are living examples and models of collective social practices that work on the level of institutions and systemic problems—we do not have to start from scratch. For example, the “Change Lab” model offers a creative and experimental approach to social transformation. These labs take on complex social challenges, such as poverty or malnutrition in India or sourcing sustainable foods, and work through a collective praxis. In his book *The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges*, Zaid Hassan writes:

> Social labs are platforms for addressing complex social challenges that have three core characteristics.

1. *They are social.* Social labs start by bringing together diverse participants to work in a team that acts collectively…

2. *They are experimental.* Social labs are not one-off experiences. They’re ongoing and sustained efforts. The team doing the work takes an iterative approach to the chal-
lenges it wants to address, prototyping interventions and managing a portfolio of promising solutions...

3. *They are systemic.* The ideas and initiatives developing in social labs, released as prototypes, aspire to be systemic in nature. This means trying to come up with solutions that go beyond dealing with a part of the whole or symptoms and address the root cause of why things are not working in the first place.\(^75\)

Change labs are one of an emerging set of practices that take a collective through a “journey” or path that shares certain resemblances to maps of spiritual development. For example, the “U Process” used widely in change labs moves through three general phases of sensing, presencing, and realizing.\(^76\) During the “presencing” phase, the participants moving through the collective process are invited to engage in contemplative practices that help to suspend and redirect awareness. Numerous systems of change include contemplative elements in a dialectic or systemic relationship with socio-political work. As an example, a model developed in the Radical Goodness approach is described as a “Fractal model of transformation:”

> We see social transformation as a fractal process in which the same patterns show up at all levels (like patterns in nature: trees, rivers, broccoli, fern, etc.), and in which changes in one level affect all the others. Whether we are working with our own minds in a personal practice, with our families and personal relationships, with our communities and organizations, or with the meta-structures of society, the results of our activities propagate across the system.\(^77\)

Just as individual practitioners have practices to transform habitual patterns, desires, hopes, fears, and visions, societal transformation has to practice with the structural and institutional practices in which we are interdependent. We do not just practice with our own mind. There is no way to fully separate our selves from society. As Sakyong Mipham has taught, when we sit down to meditate, all of society is sitting down with us; therefore, we practice society.

**Dangers and Possibilities for the Methods of Practicing Society**
We need to question some of the implications of “practicing society” in order to deepen the possibilities and anticipate problems. First, anyone who has seriously practiced a contemplative discipline knows that it is not so easy to transform one’s own experience, reworking habits and traces of fixation and ignorance. It is even more challenging to intentionally transform the collective habits of an institution, let alone the trajectory of a civilization. In addition to the unimaginable challenge, there are innumerable dangers, not the least of which is the similarity of such a socially transformative project to various totalitarian and state-focused projects of the 20th century. Indeed, much of modernity is defined by the imagined ideal of human beings’ capacity to autonomously create ideal civilizations using technology, rationality, and will. What differentiates the union of personal and social transformation practices in this article from such (often deeply problematic, violent, colonialist, and racist) modernist projects? Perhaps the answer lies in the practices themselves—they must share a fidelity to processes that align with the envisioned society, collapsing ends and means into a single movement.

A related constellation of concerns arises when we recognize the similarity between actively attempting to “practice society” and actively attempting to control or re-structure the mind. I want to elaborate upon this point in particular as a way to articulate the complexities involved with thorough reflection on practices of society. Many sophisticated meditation traditions in Buddhism—for example the Zen, Mahāmudrā, and Great Perfection meditation streams—would question whether willful effort in meditation is ultimately the best strategy to experience freedom. The logic here is that intentional effort often repeats the same ingrained perspectives and (ego) habits that created forms of entrapment in the first place, and that the path of meditation is ultimately to relax the willful exertion of a subject trying to control anything at all. The concepts and imagined ideals of meditative experience are not the experience themselves, and the meditator must go through a period of not-knowing and non-striving. The effort to try to actively change and reshape oneself may be an obstacle to deeper experiences of peace and wisdom.

This insight from these older meditation traditions is particularly relevant for our concern with practicing society. The issue is how actively and intentionally transforming social practices might unintentionally repeat some of the harmful habits and paradigms that are already operative. The very idea of actively reshaping and taking responsibility
to practice society sounds very similar to the potentially problematic modern sense of being human as “self-creating,” as we saw above, especially in relation to neuroplasticity. In modern mindfulness perspectives, the intention to restructure the brain is often celebrated. Through intentional effort, we can “recreate the brain.” While this allows for tremendous possibilities for psychological healing, it is also very close to the modern ideal to take responsibility for creating our selves: to shape our bodies through diet and exercise, to restructure our brains’ plasticity through mindfulness, medication, or therapy; to define and redefine our lifestyle-identity on Facebook; to be successful in creating our “personal economy,” as one financial ad offers. New possibilities for intentionally altering our brains and genes emerge each year within the neurosciences and genetic technologies. We are becoming responsible for an entrepreneurial relationship with our own lives, and there is supposedly an unlimited possibility to make of our lives what we want. Our job is to figure out what we want and then do it. And then we are supposed to surpass ourselves in an endless and ongoing pursuit of happiness. Ideally we should do so quickly and efficiently, once again adding to the cycles of accelerations and productivity. *Now it is our own brain, our own lives, which are produced within time-compression.* The external production modes collapse inwards, commodifying our own being. One of the features of modern consumer culture is the value of being personally inspired, productive, and in control of ourselves. We are our own gods, creating our own lives as we live them, becoming our selves in each moment. This is the possibility and danger of our times and something like a new, unstated law: to create our selves.

However, according to Alain Ehrenberg in the important work, *The Weariness of the Self,* mass depression is often the result of the responsibility for shaping our own lives. A driving force of contemporary consumer culture is the “need to become our selves,”78 which often leads to a sense of restlessness, and almost always a sense of failure. Personal initiative, self-control, and the endless possibilities of creating ourselves have become an exhausting new norm. Even those of us who are by current standards very successful, wealthy, and fortunate, may be haunted by a sense of inadequacy.

Depression is the opposite of this paradigm. Depression presents itself as an illness of responsibility in which the dominant feeling is that of failure. The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself.79
If this is the case on the individual level in modern consumer societies, what happens if we willfully (and efficiently) try to “practice society”? What happens when we think we know what an ideal society should look like and then “create it”? There is a danger that the effort to practice society would simply be an exaggeration of the unstated law to create our selves, now amplified on a social scale. Rather than “to create ourselves” now we must “create society” (and do so quickly, efficiently, and productively). The well-intentioned aspiration to practice a sane, thriving, sustainable society could easily be co-opted by the time-compression and modern ideal of exhausting self-creation.

These dangers underline the importance of the way or methods of practice. There must be a homology between the social practices and the pace, experience, and qualities of the envisioned society. The path and processes of practicing society must be analogous to the goal.

Globally, we are at a profound place of not-knowing how to proceed as an advanced industrial civilization; the knot of issues around climate change alone is enough to stop us in our tracks. How are we to know what to practice as a society? There must be a break or rupture with previous truths (and their respective practices) in order to discover not just emergent truths, but radical novelty, and begin to practice such newness as selves and as society. In order to make a leap from what seems impossible now, to realizing newness, we must pass through something like a collective “cloud of unknowing.” Bernie Glassman Roshi has articulated, “not-knowing” as the first of the three tenets of the Zen Peacemakers, and the capacity to let go and not know is central to the U Process mentioned above. The methods of practicing society must include experiences such as effortlessness and unknowing, drawn from contemplative traditions but expanded to a societal-historical scale.

Nonetheless, the capacity to let go of effort and fixed expectation does not mean a lack of vision or active commitment, just as effortlessness does not mean stopping meditation training; it means a different way of meditation training. Practicing society must include a willingness to not-know that is at the same time charged with a utopian intensity to create enlightened society. There is a political practice of utopian not-knowing that pushes us to encounter what seems to be the impossibility of practicing society in a way that makes it possible. As theorist of aesthetics and politics, Eric Cazdyn said in a recent lecture:

If we knew what it was in advance then it would no longer be utopia. Utopia is not a destination to be reached like the last
pages of a developmental narrative, but the speculative spark that keeps thought and action fresh. Utopianism has come to mean a certain kind of transcendent or wishful thinking about impossibilities. But this is to completely misunderstand the significance of speaking about utopia for both Marxism and the role of praxis. If utopian desire engages the impossible, it does so with the ultimate aim of shifting the realm of possibility. Since what is historically possible is shaped by and shapes what is historically impossible, the engagement with the impossible is at once an engagement with the possible.89

Much experimentation and training is required to discover social practices that simultaneously open up new possibilities for society rather than simply getting stuck in the limits of the present.

A spiritual comportment of active, utopian not-knowing could support such experimentation. These and related themes point to the importance of a subtle and critical methodology for societal practices that require the same level of sophistication as the ancient techniques of the self. Each of these points, problems, and dangers extend beyond the limits of this article but require close attention and remain potent horizons of future thought and action.

Conclusion

Picture the viscous black tar of an oil spill, spreading across the surface of the ocean, slinking onto beaches and into marshes, and coating the feathers and wings of the sea gulls. Many modern people feel like these birds, covered in the slime and muck of the accelerated pace of life and collective practices of entrapping speed. Overwhelmed, more individuals are learning personally transformative practices. This is metaphorically akin to cleaning the oil from birds’ wings and plumage. Through inner practices of self-cultivation, individual “birds” become more peaceful and emotionally healthy. Perhaps they even get away for a few days of silent rejuvenation. Yet pretty soon they must return to the accelerated social practices that define modern societies. The birds have to return to the dark ocean of oily slime and muck, and it is almost impossible for their feathers to stay clean. From this example, we can see that in addition to purifying and cleaning “individual” sea gulls through spiritual practice, at some point, some of us have to come
together and clean up the oil spill of shared social practices—if not for our selves, then at least for our children and future generations.

There have been astounding advances in our knowledge of neuroplasticity and the connections between meditation training and brain function. There has also been a creative synthesis of western psychology and therapies with traditional Buddhism, yoga, and mindfulness meditation. Many popular spiritual books and workshops now combine psychotherapy and older contemplative teachings, with varying degrees of authenticity, rigor, and success. This has been an important step in the development of modern spirituality, and it is a response to the real needs of contemporary society. There is a gap in our world, and these new interpretations of mindfulness, cognitive science, and spiritual-psychology are reaching out to plug the hole.

What is required now is the next step. In addition to integrating the insights of meditation, Buddhism, psychology, and neuroscience, we need to extend our inquiry into the realm of culture, politics, ecology, and economy. We have to learn to transform social practices and be explicit with the ways in which our personal practices are part of a movement to shift broader communal, institutional, economic, and political practices. This is one meaning of the phrase, “creating enlightened society.” Broadening our understanding of what it means to practice something in the first place opens up a space that moves practices beyond the “internal” and personal sphere to an intersubjective sphere of social practices.

Transformations on a personal and social level can be inseparable and simultaneous. Shifting our relationship with time, for example, can converge with a radical reorientation of technological, economic, educational, and other institutional practices that currently condition the experience of time. This means more than just slowing down as individuals, though it may necessitate such personal transformation. It also means an active and shared practice of transforming labor and learning practices, for example. But this also means learning to personally practice a different relationship with time. We have seen how Foucault was concerned with the ways in which our bodies and everyday lives are inscribed with programs of discipline reenacted through our own personal practices. That is, we are not simply “forced” to speed up the pace of our lives, but we actively participate in the practices that reinforce such speed. It is certainly not as simple as just deciding to one day transform our own relationship with time, and then change the practices of our workplace or school, global production patterns or
the rhythms of the stock market. A path of strategies, techniques, and processes is required. We need to engage in practices that cut through the habitual patterns of our society, simultaneously drawing together techniques of individual and societal praxis.

How can we contemplatively intervene in societal practices such as the cycles of acceleration? Simply raising this question as one of the essential aspects of complete spiritual practice is a step. Next, we need shared diagnoses of the sources of modern suffering—psychological, economic, and ecological. This includes a diagnosis of the operations of power that are invested in these sources of suffering. Then we need subtle methodologies and techniques of collective social practice—pathways of practicing society. Finally, we need to train in and practice the forms of life of a radically free, sustainable, and just society.

As human beings, we are always already creating our society, each moment of our lives. Collectively, we already co-create our world in how we live, and by participating in our various institutions, systems, and beliefs. There is much about our world that is intelligent and helpful. Yet right now, we are collectively creating an unsustainable global society that is not fully expressing our potential. We can begin to shift the process of creating society by collectively practicing freedom in our lives, by joining together in such practices, and by practicing transformations in our socio-economic and ecological systems, such as new modes of currency exchange, local agriculture, inspired community schools, and collective processes to work with political difference and conflict. Such collective social practices, however, need not be thought of simply as local responses to larger global issues, but rather as part of a global movement towards re-practicing paradigmatic social structures on a systemic level.

We began this article with the aspiration to perform a certain therapy—to free ourselves from the unnecessary division between personal and societal transformations. Seeing both the self and society as emerging within fields of practices (such as social acceleration practices) allows us to think and act differently, summoning our spiritual practice into the socio-political sphere and welcoming radical transformations of society into a path of practice. If it now seems not only possible, but inevitable that the spiritual and the societal, the inner and outer, can be fluidly practiced together, then the therapy has been somewhat successful, letting us out of the bottle and clearing the way for what is perhaps the real work—practicing the path of society itself. It is in this clear-space that some of the integrity and novelty of various contem-
plative practices—such as tantric techniques that join microcosm and macrocosm—may be wielded to enact and enjoy, in Charles Eisenstein’s phrase, “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”

In the Shambhala tradition the intention is not to create enlightened society some time in the future; we create enlightened society as a practice in the present. As Chögyam Trungpa stated, “The manifestation of enlightened society is not in its achievement of any ideal end-state, but in the nature of its movement at any point on its way.” Our very approach to social transformation can itself be a mode of spiritual practice that includes the personal and the socio-political as a single movement.

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Appendix and Further Resources

I am certainly not the first to make many of these points. There are sophisticated models of ethical and socio-economic practices of transformation that explicitly include the personal and the social domains. For a current example, Otto Scharmer’s work on “Theory U” offers not only a theory, but a map of collective practices that include shifts in awareness as much as methods to move towards group decisions and integrated, collective action that “emerge” from new paradigms. Scharmer’s most recent work is focused on economic transformations that include the personal, the cultural, and the ecological spheres. As mentioned above, the “social labs” model also offers both a theory of transformative and systemic practices and over twenty years of experimentation and experimentation with these methods. Charles Eisenstein’s writings, especially *Sacred Economics*, beautifully integrate personal experience, collective “Stories of the People,” studies of the development of gift and currency, and other socio-economic practices into a whole. His concern is not just theoretical, but ways in which we could transition our concrete economic practices. David Loy’s book, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, is a resource for inquiring into “social suffering” and reorients Buddhist thought towards a social view. He asks important collective questions such as “can a corporation become enlightened?” and explores the prison system and deep ecology, among other areas. Further, a rich and now decades-old tradition of “engaged Buddhism” emerged within Asian Buddhist nations struggling to interpret the process of modernization. This tradition is a rich resource for thinking through contemplatively-oriented social transformation.

The political-spiritual teachings of Confucianism, especially as described in the humanist perspective of contemporary scholar Tu Wei-Ming, provide a rich resource for ancient reflections on how the sense of self, as well as community practices, are essential to political transformations. Following classical Confucian thought, Tu Wei-Ming would likely emphasize the importance of first cultivating the self and allowing personal transformations to extend out into the family, community, and then the broader society:

In classical Confucian thought, the primary purpose of learning is for the sake of the self as a center of relationships. However, it is misleading to interpret the Confucian way of learning to be human as a form of social ethics, for the
the purpose of education in the Confucian tradition is self-cultivation. Social harmony and human rulership are natural consequences of self-cultivation. Priorities are clearly established: only by strengthening the root (self-cultivation) will the branches (regulation of the family and governance of the state) flourish. If we reverse the order by first imposing peace upon society with the anticipation that people will learn to live harmoniously among themselves, we not only violate the natural process of moral education, but rely on an external political ideology rather than the trust of a fiduciary community. This is ineffective, for social harmony can only be attained through personal self-cultivation.92

In recent anthropology, the work of Saba Mahmood articulates the ways in which women’s Islamic movements in cities like Cairo have transformed the politics of the Middle East through everyday religious practices. These political transformations have not come about through lobbying, protesting, or coercion, but rather through creating neighborhood mosques, social welfare projects, and home-study groups. In Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Mahmood shows how women’s efforts to “organize their daily conduct in accord with principles of Islamic piety and virtuous behavior” fostered their agency to transform patriarchal and western-secular conditions.93 She questions the view that “agency” always means “challenging social norms” and instead shows how pious commitment to social norms became a political force for women.

The transformative power of movements such as these is immense and, in many cases, exceeds that of conventional political groups. The political efficacy of these movements is, I would suggest, a function of the work they perform in the ethical realm—those strategies of cultivation through which embodied attachments to historically specific forms of truth come to be forged.94

There are many other resources to draw upon in order to articulate the connection between subjectivity and socio-political change that extend beyond the genres listed above. Some of these models have had brief moments of popularity. For example, the work of Marcuse—especially his books One Dimensional Man and Eros and Civilization—map out clear arguments for the subjective transformations of modern citizens and the need for radical responses that include simultaneous shifts in both psychology and socio-economic structure, especially la-
bor practices. However, many of these resources are limited to academic circles and are no longer widely read.

Eric Fromm's entire corpus could be understood as an effort to show the ways in which psychology, economy, and cultural practices are bound together. He taught that, “progress can occur only when changes are made simultaneously in the economic, socio-political and cultural spheres; that any progress restricted to one sphere is destructive to progress in all spheres.” As his writing career developed, Fromm was increasingly concerned with the “art of living,” “self-analysis,” and the cultivation of individual, mindful awareness as at least one piece of the puzzle of creating a sane society. However, and importantly, Fromm chose not to publish the chapters on mindfulness and personal awareness cultivation in one of his last works, Being and Having, because he feared that they would be misunderstood. He felt that contemporary consumer culture would be quick to seize on the meditation practices without attending to the social and political spheres. He withdrew the chapters “because he believed that his book could be misunderstood to mean that each individual has only to search for spiritual well-being and the awareness, development, and analysis of himself, without changing the economic realities that produce the ‘having’ [consuming] mode.” That is, Fromm was concerned that we would all focus just on our spiritual art of living, and forget that there are concrete political and economic conditions that create a culture of consumption, stress, ecological violence, and lack of freedom.

In some ways, this prescient and critical understanding of how personal meditation practices could be used to ignore broader realities foreshadows Slavoj Zizek’s more recent critiques of “Western Buddhism.” According to Zizek, “Western Buddhism” is the perfect supplement to contemporary forms of 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; that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is; and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw.” In other words, Western Buddhism is a fetish that allows us to sustain the current state of affairs, rather than a genuine way to change the state of affairs.

Fromm, Marcuse, Zizek, and many others bring together two of the more radical theories of modernity: Marxism and psychoanalysis (both Freud and Lacan). Thinkers throughout the 20th century looked for ways to combine the quest for socio-economic liberation with the
path to individual, psychological liberation. However, the point is not necessarily to simply join the personal/psychological with the social/economic, but also to leave open the “tension between individual and society, psychology and political economy.” Various movements, especially in Latin America, successfully amalgamated psychoanalysis and economic-equality movements. At the same time, major gaps remain. Again, Zizek writes:

From the standard Marxist point of view, psychoanalysis is unable to comprehend how the libidinal structure it portrays (the Oedipal constellation) is rooted in specific historical circumstances, which is why it elevates contingent historical obstacles to into an a priori of the human condition, while for psychoanalysis, Marxism relies on a simplified, psychologically naïve, notion of man, which is why it is unable to grasp why attempts at liberation necessarily give rise to new forms of domination.

Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* is perhaps the most original work in analyzing an interface between Freud and capitalism. In its preface Michel Foucault wrote that this influential volume should be understood “as an art of living,” in particular as an introduction to an art of living “a non-fascist life.” In other words, it is a book of ethical practices to free oneself of “not only historical fascism... but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.”

As noted above, Michel Foucault remains another significant resource for contemplating the interlocking movements of subjective experience and political forces, especially with his concern with “technologies of the self.” Other resources include psychological approaches, such as R.D. Laing’s, which view mental illness as inseparable from socio-cultural influences, and not simply the result of biology. New research in related areas include *Mind, Modernity, and Madness*, in which sociologist Liah Greenfield describes the findings of her research on “the impact of culture on human experience.” She claims that “biologically real diseases” such as schizophrenia and depression are “culturally caused—they are the products of culture.”

Despite the availability of such authors, theories, and approaches (plus many others), they and their modes of thought and criticism are not a significant part of the present turn to mindfulness, yoga, and spirituality. Why? It seems that asking this question may reveal the extent
to which many of the present forms of emerging spirituality are not ultimately concerned with questioning, challenging, or transforming our current paradigms, but rather serve to ameliorate the symptoms, although such an inquiry would require its own article. Although many modern psychologically- and contemplatively-oriented practitioners claim that there is a connection between the inner and the outer, there are few systematic analyses or models shared broadly by contemporary spiritual practitioners. This very absence can be inquired into as part of the current state of both politics and spirituality.

Notes


without Going Crazy, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012). Please see the “Author’s addendum” for further resources at the end of the article.


7. For example, the Garrison Institute offers Contemplative Based Resilience Training to support psychological well-being for field workers in humanitarian relief and other high-stress areas of social service.


15. For the Interdependence Project, see Ethan Nichtern, One City: A Declaration of Interdependence, (Sommerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011), and their Transformational Activism model; For Transformative Change, founded by angel Kyodo Williams, see www.transformativechange.org.


19. See, for example, Stephanie Kaza ed. Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005).


22. Those familiar with Māhāyana Buddhism will notice that what I am calling a “delayed model” could be similar to the classic understanding of “aspiring” (bodhi-pranidhi-citta) and “entering” (Bodhi-prāśāna-citta) bodhicitta as presented in Santideva’s Bodhicaryavatāra. In terms of mind training and the stages of the path of cultivating the awakened mind, this methodology has proven to be potent and effective for centuries and I am not calling it into question in any way. Here, I am questioning a totalizing model of spiritual
practice overall in which inner training comes first and outer action comes second (if at all). Most Buddhist teachings would seem to agree that view, meditation, and conduct (lha ba, btsun po, spyi pa) as well as ethics, meditation, and insight (sda, samdhi, prajña) are all important and need to be joined together to make a complete path.

23. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. For example the Three Tenets (not-knowing, bearing witness, loving action) of the Zen Peacemaker Order provides a fluid expression of meditative experience in guidelines for action. Yet, there are models for collective action, (such as “Change labs”) or collective group processes, (such as Art of Hosting and Deep Democracy) which contain contemplative insights in their actual processes, but are often seen as separate from formal spiritual practice “proper.” Such methods are becoming increasingly popular and are proving to be important to the emerging methods of contemplative social transformation. See the Art of Hosting website: www.artofhosting.org. For social labs see Zaid Hassan, The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges, (San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2014).

29. See especially The Nicomachean Ethics.
32. For the concept of the “everyday” (le quotidien) see Michael Sheringham, Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
38. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 10
41. Ibid., 53.
50. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 204
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 228
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 229
65. Ibid., 156
66. Ibid.
68. Ibid., Chapter 6.
69. Ibid., 152.
70. Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. (LA: Semiotext(e), 2009), 213. Importantly, for Berardi, we are entering a phase where we must engage in a therapy of our civilization, to help with the trauma and loss as the high-speed social factory that has defined the past decades begins to collapse.
77. See the document, Radical Goodness: Building Capacity for Social Transformation, by Marguerite Drescher, Adam Lobel, Noel McLellan, Sera Thompson, and Ryan Watson.
79. Ibid., 4
80. I am referencing here Alain Badiou’s theory of truth events. For Badiou, an event is a “rupture” in the normative state of affairs. It is not the emergence of something latent, but the creation of novelty. See Alain Badiou, Being and Event, Continuum, 2011) and Adrian Johnston, The Cadence of Change: Badiou, Zizek, and Political Transformations, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009).
82. I am here using Utopian in the sense explored by Frederic Jameson in Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, (London: Verso, 2005). “A politics which aims at imagining, and sometimes realizing, a system radically different from this one.”
84. See, for example, John Ransom, Foucault’s Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
86. The Karma Dzong Banner 7 (July/August 1993) 1: 6-9. Also published in The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa, vol. 2. (Boston: Shambhala Publications). This exchange was not included; it was transcribed from the audio. Thanks to Noel McClellan.
88. Hassan, Social Labs Revolution.


94. Ibid. 35.


98. Ibid.

99. See Savoj Zizek, *On Belief*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 13 for an early version of this critique, which Zizek has both sustained and adapted in more recent lectures and writings. For a more recent analysis of Buddhism see his *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012).


104. Ibid.
