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## CHAPTER 6 PRACTICING LIFE

### **Chapter Outline:**

1. Deciding Reality through Practice
2. The Fixation of Belief
  - a. An Example from Charles S. Peirce
  - b. Fixing Religious Belief
3. Putting into Practice
  - a. Application, Experimentation, and Practice
  - b. Meditation as Practice
4. Seeing the Real through Practice

### **Chapter Objectives:**

In this chapter you will be introduced to three “moments” of the philosophical skill of practicing. First you will learn about “deciding reality through practice,” how we establish our beliefs (and, in one sense, our “reality”) by means of our practice. You will read the rest of Charles Peirce’s article on “Fixation of Belief,” discovering Peirce’s understanding of the passage from doubt to belief. You will also consider how we establish our beliefs regarding a complex topic like religious belief. The second act of practicing is titled “Putting into Practice.” Here you will consider the simple act of “practicing” (like the piano), the value of application and experimentation, and the role of meditation in our practice. Finally you will discover how we “See the Real through Practice.” You will read a few samples from Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida and discover how we intuit the nature of things through action itself. Your journal

assignments will give you a chance to take a step toward putting your own reality into practice.

After studying this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe how the three skills of paying attention, asking questions, and practicing contribute to a love for (and a life of) wisdom (you will also have to review the previous chapters for this one).
- Summarize the gist of the three basic moments of the skill of practicing
- Define the four methods that, according to C. S. Peirce, we use to fix our beliefs.
- Explain how the practice of Tonglen facilitates “putting into practice.”
- Define Nishida’s understanding of action-intuition, giving an example.

Let us review for just a moment. We have learned that wisdom can be defined as *an expertise in the art of living, gained through a synthesis of personal experience in the details of life with a careful reflection on the larger issues of life* and that philosophy--as a love of wisdom--is consequently *the art and science of learning to respond, with all our resources, to the fruit of a careful evaluation of life*. This art and science aims at some kind of synthesis, some kind of “putting things together” (though it doesn’t necessarily have to be *perfectly* together). This synthesis or putting together is realized in both “minds” and “lives.” We evaluate life: the details and the larger questions. We pay attention, noticing what we may have not noticed before. Then we ask questions, honoring doubt, following inquiry through hypothesis into formal evaluation. Then we live (and that is the subject of this chapter).

So far so good. But there is more. You see:

Philosophy is about the way things are.

Just think about it. That wise person you know, what is his or her life like? Their insightful perspective, their patient attention. The point is, they are offering you something of the way things are. The classic books of wisdom and philosophy over the millennia have been respected precisely because they tell us something about the way things are. Of course, the

offerings of wisdom are small, incomplete, and at times in serious conflict with each other. But *something* of the way things are is still communicated. The point again, is, that philosophy is about the way things are. Why the attention to detail, why the reflection on the larger issues? The aim is to see life--and then to live life--as it is. Based on our evaluations of life we decide the way things are, however meagre our efforts. Even those philosophers who deny any reality or meaning or order to things are trying to tell us that “*this* is the way things are. Think and live accordingly.”

And this, then brings us to the skill of practice. This skill incorporates three somewhat-separate but interconnected moments, each of which invites us into further reflection on the terms “practice” and “reality.” Before we explore these moments, however, it will be valuable to consider, as we did last chapter, a few *unwise* or foolish ways of being that make us aware of the need for this skill.

Some decide to live life under the assumption that they simply can’t make sense of things. Consequently they (consciously or unconsciously) decide *not* to decide about the way things are, which is itself a decision about the way things are. Fear, confusion, or a strong belief in the ambiguity of things leads some into a corner where they can’t seem to move forward. They are stuck in their un-examined life.

Others suffer the opposite malady, the consequences of over-examination. These people have everything wrapped up together in a nice-neat little box. Everything is all figured out, and the implications for living are clear for one and all. Consequently, they can’t notice the problematic and rich difference in life, the things that don’t (and shouldn’t) fit.

Still others are all words but no action. Their evaluation of life is meticulously worked-out in terms of their beliefs, but for one reason or another, they have not allowed their beliefs influence the way they live. Consequently, they “say” one thing and “do” another.

Then there are those who act, but don’t learn from their actions. They do not see what their actions are telling them about things. They try to enact some belief in action (often a belief that itself has not been deeply considered), but it doesn’t work and they don’t see that their

actions are informing them about problems in their beliefs. They are suffering from unreflective action.

There are those who put belief into action and expect instant transformation (and some reject their beliefs due to the failure of that instant transformation). They come to some belief about the nature of the ideal society and throw themselves into political action, anticipating massive changes in their community or in the world. They identify personal patterns of wrong thinking or feeling and expect to become entirely different now that they *know* that these patterns are wrong. But some patterns in individuals and communities do not change readily.

And then there are those who mistake the details of practice for wisdom itself. These are the people who come to “enlightenment” about reality and now consider themselves wise, not because they have their heart and mind and life harmoniously adapted to a careful evaluation of things, but because they practice meditation or recycle paper or read their Bible or do some other exercise. While there may be some relationship between ‘practices’ of belief (or of unbelief) and the deep, lived ‘practice’ of belief, one must not mistake the details surrounding the matter for the matter itself.

Wisdom, therefore, is facilitated by learning how to practice life. And we practice life when we learn to decide reality through practice, when we learn to put life into practice, and when we learn to see reality through practice.

### Deciding Reality through Practice

Throughout this text we have been talking about wisdom as a kind-of integration, a bringing-together of parts of our lives at significant levels of depth into a somewhat unified whole (though we must also remember that at times, philosophy is meant to tear us apart). From this perspective, philosophy is seen as an attempt to think and live according to the way things really are, to live in step with reality. In the last chapter we learned that part of this process involves an integrity in terms of our “asking questions,” how we move from doubt, through hypothesis and, into belief and action. A critical step in this process is the step of making a

decision what to believe (or at least a decision regarding how we will *act* in a given situation - which necessarily reflects some sort of “working belief”). Perhaps there is a connection between our decision to *believe* a certain thing and our decision to *act* a certain way. And this leads us to consider, at the juncture between asking questions and practicing life, about how we establish our beliefs about the way things are. Just how, in the midst of all the data and influences of life, do we establish our beliefs?

### The Fixation of Belief

We explored, last chapter, the character of doubt and belief by looking at part of an article by Charles S. Peirce entitled “The Fixation of Belief” [Peirce means by “fixation” what we might mean by “establishing”]. This article addressed three “guiding principles” about human reasoning:

- (a) there are such states as doubt and belief
- (b) a passage from one to the other is possible
- (c) this transition is subject to some rules

In the third and fourth sections of the article, Peirce treated the first and second guiding of these principles. There we learned about the nature of doubt and inquiry. In the fifth section of his essay, he addresses the last principle, that the transition from doubt to belief is generally subject to some rules. In this final section, Peirce identifies four methods that people use to fix beliefs: the method of tenacity, the method of authority, the *a priori* method (or the way of reason), and the method of science. Let’s review these methods now, looking at the rest of Peirce’s article.<sup>1</sup> See if you can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each method as Peirce sees it. Notice Peirce’s structure of this last section (skim and slow read). He presents a method, illustrating its advantages. Then he presents problems which arise with that method (“But”). Then he shows

1. Charles S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *The Essential Peirce*, ed. the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 115–23.

how a realization of the problems with one method leads to an exploration of the next method. A couple terms you may need to know:

“passions” - Peirce uses this term to refer to strong emotions

“metaphysics, metaphysical” - deals with the discussion about the nature of reality

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#### V [Four Methods of Fixation of Belief]

If the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry, and if belief is of the nature of a habit, why should we not attain the desired end, by taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it? This simple and direct method is really pursued by many men. . . . [I]n many cases it may very well be that the pleasure he derives from his calm faith overbalances any inconveniences resulting from its deceptive character. Thus, if it be true that death is annihilation, then the man who believes that he will certainly go straight to heaven when he dies, provided he have fulfilled certain simple observances in this life, has a cheap pleasure which will not be followed by the least disappointment. A similar consideration seems to have weight with many persons in religious topics, for we frequently hear it said, "Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I should be wretched if I did." When an ostrich buries its head in the sand as danger approaches, it very likely takes the happiest course. It hides the danger, and then calmly says there is no danger; and, if it feels perfectly sure there is none, why should it raise its head to see? A man may go through life, systematically keeping out of view all that might cause a change in his opinions, and if he only succeeds I do not see what can be said against his doing so. It would be an egotistical impertinence to object that his procedure is irrational, for that only amounts to saying that his method of settling belief is not ours. He does not propose to himself to be rational, and, indeed, will often talk with scorn of man's weak and illusive reason. So let him think as he pleases.

But this method of fixing belief, which may be called the method of tenacity, will be unable to hold its ground in practice. The social impulse is against it. The man who adopts it will find that other men think differently from him, and it will be apt to occur to him, in some saner moment, that their opinions are quite as good as his own, and this will shake his confidence in his belief. This conception, that another man's thought or

sentiment may be equivalent to one's own, is a distinctly new step, and a highly important one. It arises from an impulse too strong in man to be suppressed, without danger of destroying the human species. Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community.

Let the will of the state act, then, instead of that of the individual. Let an institution be created which shall have for its object to keep correct doctrines before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed. Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men's apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn of some reason to think otherwise than they do. Let their passions be enlisted, so that they may regard private and unusual opinions with hatred and horror. Then, let all men who reject the established belief be terrified into silence. Let the people turn out and tar-and-feather such men, or let inquisitions be made into the manner of thinking of suspected persons, and when they are found guilty of forbidden beliefs, let them be subjected to some signal punishment.

This method has, from the earliest times, been one of the chief means of upholding correct theological and political doctrines, and of preserving their universal or catholic character. . . . In judging this method of fixing belief, which may be called the method of authority, we must, in the first place, allow its immeasurable mental and moral superiority to the method of tenacity. Its success is proportionately greater; and, in fact, it has over and over again worked the most majestic results. . . . For the mass of mankind, then, there is perhaps no better method than this. If it is their highest impulse to be intellectual slaves, then slaves they ought to remain.

But no institution can undertake to regulate opinions upon every subject. Only the most important ones can be attended to, and on the rest men's minds must be left to the action of natural causes. This imperfection will be no source of weakness so long as men are in such a state of culture that one opinion does not influence another -- that is, so long as they cannot put two and two together. But in the most priest-ridden states some individuals will be found who are raised above that condition. These men possess a wider sort of social feeling; they see that men in other countries and in other ages have held to very different doctrines from those which they themselves have been brought up to believe; and they cannot help seeing that it is the mere accident of their having been taught as they have, and of their having been surrounded with the manners

and associations they have, that has caused them to believe as they do and not far differently. Nor can their candour resist the reflection that there is no reason to rate their own views at a higher value than those of other nations and other centuries; thus giving rise to doubts in their minds.

They will further perceive that such doubts as these must exist in their minds with reference to every belief which seems to be determined by the caprice either of themselves or of those who originated the popular opinions. The willful adherence to a belief, and the arbitrary forcing of it upon others, must, therefore, both be given up. A different new method of settling opinions must be adopted, that shall not only produce an impulse to believe, but shall also decide what proposition it is which is to be believed. Let the action of natural preferences be unimpeded, then, and under their influence let men, conversing together and regarding matters in different lights, gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes. . . . The most perfect example of it is to be found in the history of metaphysical philosophy. Systems of this sort have not usually rested upon any observed facts, at least not in any great degree. They have been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed "agreeable to reason." . . .

This method is far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason than either of the others which we have noticed. But its failure has been the most manifest. It makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion, and accordingly metaphysicians have never come to any fixed agreement, but the pendulum has swung backward and forward between a more material and a more spiritual philosophy, from the earliest times to the latest. And so from this, which has been called the *a priori* method, we are driven, in Lord Bacon's phrase, to a true induction. . . .

To satisfy our doubts, therefore, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency -- by something upon which our thinking has no effect. Some mystics imagine that they have such a method in a private inspiration from on high. But that is only a form of the method of tenacity, in which the conception of truth as something public is not yet developed. Our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its influence to one individual. It must be something which affects, or might affect, every man. And, though these affections are necessarily as various as are individual conditions, yet the method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same. Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: There are Real

things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. . . .

It is not to be supposed that the first three methods of settling opinion present no advantage whatever over the scientific method. On the contrary, each has some peculiar convenience of its own. The *a priori* method is distinguished for its comfortable conclusions. It is the nature of the process to adopt whatever belief we are inclined to, and there are certain flatteries to the vanity of man which we all believe by nature, until we are awakened from our pleasing dream by rough facts. The method of authority will always govern the mass of mankind; and those who wield the various forms of organized force in the state will never be convinced that dangerous reasoning ought not to be suppressed in some way. If liberty of speech is to be untrammelled from the grosser forms of constraint, then uniformity of opinion will be secured by a moral terrorism to which the respectability of society will give its thorough approval. Following the method of authority is the path of peace. . . . But most of all I admire the method of tenacity for its strength, simplicity, and directness. Men who pursue it are distinguished for their decision of character, which becomes very easy with such a mental rule. They do not waste time in trying to make up their minds what they want, but, fastening like lightning upon whatever alternative comes first, they hold to it to the end, whatever happens, without an instant's irresolution. This is one of the splendid qualities which generally accompany brilliant, unlasting success. It is impossible not to envy the man who can dismiss reason, although we know how it must turn out at last.

Such are the advantages which the other methods of settling opinion have over scientific investigation. A man should consider well of them; and then he should consider that, after all, he wishes his opinions to coincide with the fact, and that there is no reason why the results of those three first methods should do so. To bring about this effect is the prerogative of the method of science. Upon such considerations he has to make his choice -- a choice which is far more than the adoption of any intellectual opinion, which is one of the ruling decisions of his life, to which, when once made, he is bound to adhere.

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What did you think of these methods of fixing belief? Did you recognize them? Do you know people who might be characterized by one or the other approaches? To which methods do you yourself tend? The main point for Charles Peirce, and for us in this chapter, is to see that in the “method of science”--which for Peirce is the method to use if we wish our opinions to coincide with fact (the way things are)--one’s belief is fixed through practice. It is by watching and confirming the actual practice of things that we settle our opinions and fix our beliefs. Consequently, our “reality,” our sense of the way things are, is established through the observation of practice and is affirmed in our decision to practice life a particular way (our decision to sit on the chair itself fixes our belief that the chair will support us).

### Fixing Religious Belief

We have considered how we establish, or “fix”, our beliefs with regard to general subjects. But what do you do about fixing belief when it is a particularly difficult belief to resolve with any degree of certainty (making the way of science difficult) and yet you are unsatisfied with the character of the other methods? What about, for example, the issue of belief in “God”?<sup>2</sup>

Here and there, as a teacher of philosophy, I find myself asking a student, “Do you believe in God?” Frequently they will answer, “I don’t know. There’s not enough evidence to convince me one way or another.” Then, sometimes, I will ask that student, “So, when you wake up tomorrow morning, will you pray or not?” The question of belief (or at least “working belief” - in this case, belief that there is a God who attends to human existence) is settled or embodied in the practice of life (in the practice of prayer). The question is, “How will you choose to practice, and why?” In the face of inconclusive evidence, how is a choice of life on an issue as large as

2. Questions of belief in God are common to philosophical discussion and to the life of wisdom in general. We will devote an entire chapter to the philosophy of religion. Here we are only looking at religious belief as a case study in the reasonable establishment of less-strictly scientific belief.

belief in God to be made? The history of philosophy (both West and East) provides, on the one hand, a host of *reasons* for (and against) the existence of God, each of which possess more or less strength for different philosophers. There are, on the other hand, philosophical approaches which reject reason or “proofs” in favor of the role of *faith* in religious matters. While evaluation of the merits of “proofs” and “faith” is a valuable exercise, our aim here is not to evaluate the arguments concerning the relationship between faith and reason per se. Rather it is to consider the *integrative process* by which we wisely establish our religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

Let us begin by considering how we establish our beliefs about other ambiguous matters. Take, for example, our interpretation of history. One historian may emphasize one side of things. Another historian may draw attention to other matters. Both will draw upon certain “facts,” which may be mutually clarified by examining documents or other sources of historical research. These facts, however, will be comprehended within a different overall perspective by each of the two historians. Perhaps these two historians might have occasion to compare notes. One may unveil facts that have been unnoticed by the other. The other may point out that *this* set of facts does not necessarily lead to *that* conclusion. Perhaps they learn much from one another, but in the end agree to disagree about their interpretation of history. Each knows that s/he must make a choice, because both are politically involved and their approach to their political involvements is deeply connected to their interpretations of history. They can’t *not* decide. Neither is certain their position is correct. Consequently, each decides to fix belief in a position while remaining open to revision in the future.

A similar process can be followed for matters of religious belief. There are “facts” in matters of religion that can be considered: the character of the processes of nature, the nature of human experience and historical process, the details of various religious beliefs throughout the world, the character of personal religious experience and so on. These can be clarified by

3. In the next paragraphs dealing with existence of God, I am summarizing the treatment of the topic found in C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking About Faith*, Contours of Christian Philosophy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 159–79, who in turn is drawing from Basil Mitchell’s *The Justification of Religious Belief*.

cooperative research. For example, one might argue that people everywhere have believed in God, while another might correct the first by pointing out that, in fact, throughout global history documentation points to a wider belief in a plurality of spirits or ancestor-survival than a worship of one “god.” One might question belief in a personal god, bothered by the problem of “free will and predestination” (does God choose who will be “saved” or do we decide our own future ultimately undetermined by divine influence?), while another might reply that belief in materialist or impersonal spiritualist forms of *karma* fall prey to a similar difficulty (is world process simply the necessary working out of the movement of atoms/spiritual energy or is it the accidental play of chance?). Needless to say these are not trivial matters of clarification. One’s sense of the meaning of life is affected by one’s approach to such questions. Even what we might consider a “fact” (or how we might look at the meaning of a “fact”) will differ. But in some measure, through communication and observation, we clarify the details we interpret through some overall account of religious belief.

A religious belief accounts for the “facts” of religion, like the historian, in terms of various interpretive frameworks. And, as with the frameworks of history, the interpretative systems of religion are themselves evaluated with regard to their reasonableness. Although human beings may find difficulties expressing the relationship between the Infinite and finite (and, consequently, one would normally allow some space for a few paradoxes in religious matters), we can still examine religious belief for overall logical consistency (for example, uncovering fallacies of argument) and internal coherence (does the belief system seem to “fit” together as a whole?).

In the end we may find that a certain belief system exhibits what I call “sufficient warrant to act as if. . . .” Sufficient reason to act, for example, as if there is a God (and therefore to pray and such). We have no certain proof. We remain open to revision in the future. We have not, however, made an arbitrary “leap of faith” either. We have considered the evidence for belief in God and found it to be at least as reasonable as other systems of belief. And so we decide to act

in a religious way. In this manner, religious beliefs, like those of history, can be sincerely adopted by the exercise of responsible thinking within our own contexts of life.

But can we really *act* on such beliefs? Religious beliefs are not like beliefs about historical interpretation or political preference. They involve commitments related to many dimensions of life at all levels of depth. Some people are *killed* for their religious beliefs (note however, that in some places historical interpretations and political preferences are equally costly). Shouldn't we be *certain* before we make these kinds of commitments? Shouldn't we hold back in our commitments until we discover what is absolutely the case?

Let's consider another example of "deciding reality," the decision to marry. C. Stephen Evans suggests we consider the following:

A woman who is considering offers of marriage from different men has no algorithm for determining which choice is "right" for her. *If* she decides to marry, however, it would be the height of foolishness to refrain from committing herself wholeheartedly to the marriage on the grounds that her evidence that her husband is truly loving, kind and brave is not absolutely compelling to everyone.

Religious faith would seem to be similar. In Christianity, for example, Jesus confronts potential followers with certain claims and demands on them. . . . Furthermore, since most religions make predictions about the deepest experiences of believers, a wholehearted commitment may make it possible to test some of the claims of the religion in a unique way, just as a wholehearted commitment to a program of psychotherapy is an essential condition for testing the effectiveness of the program.

In summary, it is the nature of true religious belief that it be part of a way of life. Committing oneself to such a way of life seems to be the sort of thing which must be done in an all-or-nothing, unconditional manner, if it is to be done at all, even if the *evidence* for the commitment is a matter of degree.

Religious commitment, like marital commitment, requires a serious investment of life in the face of imperfect, yet reasonable, evidence. There is a wisdom to knowing when there is not yet sufficient evidence to act, and when you are just evading decision. There is a wisdom to know which loose ends to leave loose, and which to secure (there is an appreciation of the way things are that *depends* on leaving strange things strange). There is knowing when to consult trusted family and friends and when to listen deep within oneself. Ultimately it is a decision to *practice* reality, to “act as if” and in the practice, to let reality show itself.

Whether in ordinary matters or in difficult issues like politics or religion, we often decide or “fixing” our belief about reality--we establish our working reality--through practice.

### Putting into Practice

Once “deciding reality” has been completed, it is time to “put” that reality “into practice.” What do we mean when we talk about “putting into practice”? Usually we are speaking about a movement from ideas or words into actions.

### Application, Experimentation, and Practice

“Putting into practice” is the *application* of something into concrete situations. Take, for example, beliefs about clothes among street gangs. Imagine you are a member of a gang. You decide that the clothes “required” for association with this or that gang is more determined by advertising and marketing rather than by the creativity of the individual gangs. This is reality as you see it. Now, to put it into practice. Can you convince your home-boys that those shoes and those coats they’ve been wearing are way too expensive, and that they might be better off (and more creative) to design their own clothes? What will you decide to do in any case? This is putting reality into practice.

Putting-into-practice usually begins with small steps and builds to bigger steps. There is a progression of living into the real bit by bit. We decide that our clothing is decided by the fashion industry rather than by local community and we decide to live into that reality. So, we take a first

step. We choose to wear different shoes and see what others say. After answering lots of questions (and enduring a few insults), others begin to catch on and try wearing different shoes. Perhaps the idea spreads to coats as well. Small, but measurable steps of success. Pretty soon you are helping your gang (and then others as well) to find alternative but appropriate clothing.

At times, putting reality into practice *takes practice*. We are told that we have gifts at music or sports, and we begin to believe this. But the realization of this takes practice. We sit at the piano an hour a day playing scales. We go out back and shoot free-throws every day. We are putting reality into practice by practicing. We believe that the universe is not merely material, but spiritual as well. We decide to put that into practice by investing some time into spiritual exercises (for example, just sitting and paying attention to spiritual things). Well, that may not be so easy. And like music or sports, putting our metaphysical beliefs (about the nature of the fundamentally real) into practice “takes practice.” It takes effort and it takes attention. In time, however, practice leads to improvement and one begins to realize the reality one is trying to put into practice.

Putting reality into practice involves *application*, a working-out of the concrete implications of a belief for day-to-day living. But this also involves both *experimentation* and *revision*. What, for example, does it mean to say that you’re “green”(in the ecological sense)? You may have reached a point in your own understanding of the relationship between humans and the rest of nature where you woke up one morning and said to yourself, “You know, I think I’m *green*. I now think there’s much more to this ecology stuff than I used to.” But when it comes to putting this belief into practice, there may be a lot of exploration. You start with recycling. That’s easy enough. So then you decide to take a big step and commit to eating only locally grown food. Well, you may find that some important foods are just *not* grown locally. You are spending lots of hours and lots of dollars (and lots of gas going from store to store/market) trying to keep your commitment. Maybe *your* blend of values (family, ecology, frugality . . .) is best kept if you buy some of your food locally here at these two stores, and get the rest once a month at the supermarket. So you revise and see what happens. And so on. Once

again, there is the wisdom of keeping your commitments so that your life matches your beliefs. There is also the wisdom of knowing where your personal boundaries are when it comes to living it out.

### Meditation as Practice

One exercise that helps the process of putting reality into practice is the ‘practice’ of meditation. We have already explored one form of meditation which is oriented around simply paying attention. We have also seen other forms of meditation wherein one follows a topic or thinks about a matter with a degree of focused concentration. You have already read Descartes’ “First Meditation.” There are also forms of meditation which are oriented around facilitating the fully-integrated (heart, head, hand) realization of some aspect of life. For example, the virtue of “compassion” is an important value within many schools of Buddhist ethics. One way, within Tibetan Buddhist life, that compassion is facilitated and expressed is through a meditation practice known as *Tonglen*.<sup>4</sup> After awakening compassion in oneself (for example, through recollection of an experience of compassion, through imaginatively “taking the place” of someone who may need compassion, or through imagining a dear friend in the place of the one in need, or through other means--making sure not to shy away from compassion when it is sensed, but rather to feel it and wish it spread throughout the world), one proceeds to preliminary *Tonglen* practice. The preliminary practice involves, for example, imagining a loved one (especially one who may be suffering). As you breathe in, you imagine yourself receiving all of their suffering and pain with compassion. As you exhale, you imagine sending them warmth, healing and joy. This process is intensified in the more complete exercise of *Tonglen* which follows the preliminaries, involving a more specific imaginative meditation on the pain and suffering of another: absorbing their suffering, dissolving that suffering into smoke, and communicating light and healing to the other. Those who practice *Tonglen* suggest first, that it

4. See, for example, Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Gaffney, Patrick, Harvey, Andrew <eds> (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 193–208.

serves as a vehicle for realizing the reality of compassion within oneself--through the act of meditation one actually *becomes* more compassionate and therefore more likely to embody this virtue throughout life. It puts reality into practice by bringing the reality to bear upon our patterns of mind, heart, and, consequently, hand. Second, the practice is recommended as a manifestation of compassion in the world in general. People are *helped* through our devoted expressions of compassion, even in thought. Try it sometime. What reality do you want to put into practice? Spend some time imagining that reality in clear instances in your own life. Imagine it in the lives of others surrounding you. Imagine it spreading throughout the world. See if meditation does not help you put reality into practice.

Putting-into-practice is not always easy. In fact at times it can seem almost impossible. We need help. And perhaps this itself is a bit of a realization of reality. At times we simply can't do it alone. And so we ask others to help us, to listen, to support, encourage, keep us accountable, and so on. Perhaps it is here that we turn to an Ultimate Other for help, looking to the Infinite when our finiteness is so "in our face." In any case, the skill of practicing reality will, sooner or later, bring us to the struggles of trying to put reality into practice, struggles which will sometimes bring us to the edge of reality itself.

### Seeing Reality through Practice

We decide reality through a decision to practice that reality. We put reality into practice--through practice. Then we simply practice life, and let reality show itself through practice. And indeed, reality shows itself to us *through* our practice. We form our ideas about things and make commitments based on them. Then we act and watch. What do we see? Are our ideas of what things are like confirmed or not? How do others respond to our actions? How does nature respond? How does the world of spirit respond? As we shall see in our chapter on knowledge, there are some who see the source of "knowledge" in our initial experience of the world. There are others who emphasize reason as the source of knowledge. Yet there are still others who argue that knowledge, *as* knowledge, arises in the practice of life. For Charles Peirce, founder of

American pragmatism, the formation of a hypothesis and the clarification of ideas through deduction are only finally confirmed through the testing of ideas through the ongoing practice of life (or the ongoing practice of the scientific community), wherein “external permanency” has its own say in the refining of our ideas over time. A similar point was emphasized, as we shall see below, in the later writings of Kitaro Nishida, founder of modern Japanese philosophy.

Watching reality respond to our practice of reality is itself a kind of “paying attention.” And here we return to the skills we have already learned. We act, *and in the midst of our acting* we stop, become present-with, and notice what is the case. Some of us are foolish, getting to the point of deciding reality and then simply acting without noticing, not giving reality the space to clarify itself to us. Others of us are wise, seeing reality--re-discovering the real--*through* our practice.

I remember learning how to use a spray machine to paint houses. I had used sprayers when I attempted my own paint business, but it wasn't until I was working side by side with journeymen painters that I actually “caught it.” They kept telling me about the “feel” of the motion from side to side that characterizes the proper spray stroke. I would watch them and listen to their instructions: how to hold the wrist, when to press and release the trigger, how far to overlap in each stroke, the angle of the gun, the distance from the wall. But again and again, I could not produce the quality of work my foremen did. Over time, however, I began to get it. It was not a classroom learning, however. I would just do something right and “notice” (yet a just barely conscious noticing). Gradually this aspect and that aspect of the act of spraying fell into place until, like my mentors, I, too, knew what the proper spray stroke “meant.” It was a knowledge that involved an entire system of meaning: customers, dollars, films of paint thickness, color, reflected light, and on and on--all of which were assumed and expressed in this single bodily motion. But it wasn't a knowledge remembered in the mind. It was a knowledge learned, expressed, and lived in the body, in the feel of the movement of my arm from one side to another, and in the ongoing realization of *action*.

Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) uses the phrase “action-intuition” to refer to something like this. The *Kodshana Encyclopedia of Japan* identifies Nishida as “the most important philosopher of modern Japan.”<sup>5</sup> Having training both as a mathematician and philosopher, he chose so specialize in philosophy, striving to integrate the heritage and language of Western philosophy with his own unique Eastern perspective. After he retired from teaching at Kyoto University in 1928 (where he founded an entire “school” of philosophical followers), he continued writing, and in 1933-34 produced *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* and a series of essays as an attempt to articulate and clarify a formal expression of his philosophical system. Nishida, in *Fundamental Problems*, seeks to look at philosophical problems from a new standpoint. Rather than approaching philosophy from the standpoint of the intellectual self, he suggests beginning from the standpoint of the “active Self,” the concretely engaged individual as it moves from one point in time to another. In his 1938 essay “The Unity of Opposites” Nishida clarifies this standpoint further by developing his concept of “action-intuition.” Nishida sees reality as a momentary “union of opposites,” a simultaneous manifestation of an ‘object’ and its own contradiction. Each is dependent on the other in order to “be” what it is. There is interaction and change, but it is not the change of a system of development. It is simply the momentary change from this configuration of the union of opposites to another, all rising from the foundation of Absolute Nothingness. This all may sound very obscure. That’s OK. Just follow closely, reflectively, point by point (slowly thinking about each line) as we sample a little of Nishida’s writing as he leads us to understand how we discover reality through action.<sup>6</sup>

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Conceiving and grasping something through action,intuition means seeing it through formation- comprehending it through poiesis [a Greek word for creative action].

5. Valdo H. Viglielmo, “Nishida Kitaro,” in *Kodshana Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodshana, 1983), VI.14.

6. Kitaro Nishida, “Unity of Opposites,” in *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness*, trans. Robert Schinzinger (Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Center P, 1958), 161–241. For more on Kyoto School philosophy and Nishida, see Robert J. J. Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitaro* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

I have said that we are forming the things- and that- on the other hand, at the same time- the things- while formed by us- are forming us by themselves- as something independent; and I have said that we are born out of the world of things. All this means that we grasp reality through action, intuition- while the act- from the formed toward the forming- is contained in the object- contradicting itself.

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Think about this for a moment. We form things. We form them by our actions (as when we create objects), but we also “form” them when we identify something (consciously or unconsciously) as *that* and not as *me*. When we identify something, we say that it is “that” and that it is “not me.” We “form” the something in this process. And in the identifying of things, we form both “myself” and the “not myself.” Through identifying the “not I,” I form the “I”. (Can you get this? When I say that something is “that” and not “me,” I further clarify how I understand “me”). And this is not some formal or academic categorization. It is the stuff of ordinary life. My activity forms what is and in that forming the things that I form, in turn, form me. And we are born, we come to be who we are, out of this process. It is a process of the constant movement of a kind-of “union of opposites.” Action-intuition, Nishida says, is the seeing of reality through that formation process in action.

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Such conceptual knowledge [grasping reality through action-intuition] is possible only in a world which forms itself as [one] present of unity of opposites. The self, forming of the world as present of unity of opposites- has the character of consciousness- as has been said above.

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What Nishida means by a “present of unity of opposites” is that reality (the world) forms itself moment by moment (“present” by “present”) as a unity of opposites (the “I” and the “not-I”). What reality is, is this present union of opposites. Our knowledge of this is capable only in an action-intuition, a grasp realized in the action wherein this world is as it is, formed and forming in the moment. Furthermore, this world (as he has earlier discussed) does not appear to

be some kind of “thing,” but rather a kind-of consciousness wherein the “I” and the “not-I” are united.

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As forming factors of such a world- we grasp reality through action,intuition- i.e. through poesis. This is the essence of our conceptual knowledge. What we-today- call conceptual knowledge- is essentially that which we have gained through action,intuition, by forming things. We have gained it through poesis . . . Society originates in poesis as centre. Our conceptual knowledge must have developed from social production [remember the “creative formation” idea behind poesis]. The concept of “thing” must have originally been conceived through social production. The origin of conceptual knowledge lies- I think- in the style of production of [self,forming] things [again note - forming, production] which have been conceived through social production.

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Nishida is describing human persons as simply one “factor” of this world of the unity of opposites which has the character of consciousness. As such we grasp reality, we “know” through creative, forming action. Again, rather than conceiving of truth and knowledge and such as aspects of some intellectual mechanism undertaken by absolutely independent individuals, Nishida sees knowledge as the momentary grasp of reality through our own forming of things in action. Through our forming we see the union of opposites, the “I” and the “not-I.” And we see the changing configurations of this union of opposites. Now this is not just an individual formation but especially a social formative knowledge. Thus, what we generally think of as “conceptual” knowledge is really the working out of social poesis forming things (naming reality) over time. This is our “style of production”--our style of forming things--as a society.

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In so far as the world has the character of a plane of consciousness- and we the character of acts of consciousness- the world can be called a “logical universal”. The “act of judgment” means: comprehending things- acting,reflecting- as an individual Self. Knowledge of objective reality through judgments is there where we- as individual selves in the present- at the point of the individual Self- comprehend things- acting,reflecting. But what does “individual Self in the present” mean? It means: Individual in the world of unity of opposites- where past and future are one through

contradiction. It means: Individual of the historical space of the absolute present. Comprehending things- acting, reflecting as such an individual Self, through poesis, means seeing things in the historical space as absolute present. It means: the law of things becomes clear and distinct in the present which encloses past and future. It means grasping the style of productivity of the world. Here is the world of objective knowledge.

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Here, Nishida gives his account of what philosophers call “objective knowledge” or “judgment.” Whereas some might wonder how such an odd approach to reality--where the Self is only a mere “factor” of the self-unfolding series of manifestations of unions of opposites--can account for such a thing as “knowledge” of objective reality, Nishida fits it all in to a coherent system in which our presence to the present (paying attention) in the midst of action is the key to recognizing the character of things. He repeats the phrase “It means” (did you notice this repetition?) in order to give the reader different samples of what this presence to the present is like.

“Action-intuition” is one way of looking at the act of seeing the way things are, the details and the larger character of things, through practice. It is a moment of feedback and re-integration, when what we say about reality meets reality itself. This is the final inductive test of our hypothesis. We decide reality through the decision to practice it. We put it into practice through particular practices. Finally, in and through practice--this *poesis*--we see reality itself again. Later, in our chapter on “What is (Real)?” we will see how social practice creates reality. Here we see how reality is decided, discovered and embodied in practice. The skill of practicing reality is in the artful navigation of each step.

**[Tired of dead, boring philosophy formed from all words and no action? Want to put your concerns into practice? Check out JA 6.1 Putting Life into Practice]**

## **Journal Assignment 6.1    Putting Life into Practice**

Are your beliefs just words, or do you live what you say? What would it mean to really live what you say you believe? Or perhaps you discover what you believe--what is real--in the process of living itself? This exercise is designed to help you explore and live life through your own practice.

### **Deciding the Real**

Sometimes we find ourselves “deciding the real” through practice. We have explored our questions. It is now time to decide what we believe and act on that decision. What beliefs are you deciding about?

Now first, it might be helpful to review your own personal inclinations with regard to “belief fixing.” Go back to Charles Peirce’s categories and compare his categories with regard to your own life. Into which of his four categories do you tend to fit? How have you decided about your key beliefs in the past? What about more complex or ambiguous beliefs (like belief in a god)--how have you approached evaluation of these kinds of beliefs in the past? Then dream a bit: how might you like to approach the evaluation and fixation of your beliefs in the future? Perhaps you have a specific example you might like to work on. Do you think you are ready to decide on this issue yet? What might you need to help you become ready? What kinds of unwise traps might you be likely to fall into (knowing your own tendencies)? How do you plan to avoid these traps?

### **Putting into Practice**

Perhaps there are some areas of life that you have become convinced of (you have established a belief regarding the state of something), but you have not really “put” this belief “into practice” yet. Now is your chance to consider how to live your beliefs. First, just allow

yourself to “bathe” in this belief/these beliefs for a while. Look at them. Enjoy them. Imagine them realized here or there. Then, after you have gotten the “feel” of your belief(s), turn your mind gently (without losing this “feel”) to think about the implications of your belief(s). What might it mean in life to believe what you believe? What would your work life, your school life, your home life, look like if you really lived your belief(s)? What would you advise a close friend if that person adopted your belief(s) and asked you, “What now?”

What are the “first steps” to putting your belief into practice? Think of steps that are small enough realistically to be practiced, but big enough to have some sense of success when they are practiced. What are “bigger” steps, maybe even steps so big you cannot ever imagine going *that* far? What kinds of things might you have to “practice” along the way? Can you think of a process of *application, experimentation, revision*, for your belief? Are there any forms of *meditation* that might help you put your reality into practice?

### **Seeing the Real through Practice**

Finally, perhaps there are areas of your life that you are beginning to live in a more explicit manner. Yet you want to see what reality has to say about those areas in the midst of your practice of life. It is time to explore some ways of “seeing the real” in your life “through practice.”

First, go back to your notes on “paying attention” and reflect a bit on how that skill might be applied to life in action. How do you “pay attention” to reality in life? How do you pay attention “in the midst” of life? Is it possible to *stop, eliminate unwanted distractions, become present with, notice* and so on in the middle of everyday activity? How might this be done? Is it possible to reflect and notice the real after the activity, perhaps even at the end of the day? How can you “pay attention” to your ongoing life?

Next, think a bit about “action-intuition.” Think about your own “forming” activities and how they--in the moment--form you. Have you ever had an experience when you have seen

things as they are *through* action (poesis)? What have you noticed about the way things are?  
How might you facilitate the experience/awareness of action-intuition in the future?

Through practice we see the real, we become more real, and we learn to make the real  
real in our lives. Really!

Bibliography