

**Session 7 Guide**  
**Deepening Practices and Questions**  
**Chapter 6: Life As Practice**

This week focuses on **Chapter 6** of *A New Republic of the Heart*. As always, there are more questions here than you'll have time to discuss, so I suggest you select a manageable few to deeply consider, journal about and/or discuss.

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In Part One, we considered what time it is on the planet, how hard it is for us to awaken from our collective trance, our responsibilities to make a difference, the profound paradoxical inherent wholeness and holiness that is the very nature of ourselves and all experience, the evolutionary context of our lives, and the revolutionary implications of an integral worldview. Together, these create a context for considering how we can “be the change we want to see in the world” and that is the focus of Part Two of this book.

We cannot evolve into our full human and spiritual potential—or even survive—without a healthy life-support system. The future of our life-support system—planet Earth—depends on what humans will do. And in order to do what needs to be done, in the most effective way, we must grow, evolve, rise to meet the challenge.

How? By being smart, and doing what we would do anyway, whenever we could be at our best. By realizing that we are always practicing something, shaping how we will be in the future by how we are actively being now. By intending to wake up and be our best in every moment across a whole life of committed practice.

This chapter is all about the nature of practice — as a matter of choosing more awareness, deeper care, and showing up more fully in every present moment. It explains exactly why practice is so central. It describes many of the different kinds of practice that are appropriate, necessary and effective. And it opens up an integral understanding and view of how every moment of life, at every level, individually and in community, in every aspect of our lives — IS an opportunity to practice.

We can always awaken, grow and serve. OR we can always enact unconscious patterns of reaction and self-consolation. This chapter describes a series of universal “orienting generalizations” that provide deep practical insight into exactly how you can live a whole life of genuine practice.

**Deepening Questions:**

1. As we grow, we more and more deeply take to heart the insight that “life is a school” that keeps delivering the same lessons again and again until we really learn them. At each stage of our growth

we become more profoundly committed to waking up and maturing and taking fuller responsibility for our experience and way of showing up in life. Looking back over your life, what are the transitions that have meaningfully “upped your game”? Is such a transition possible now?

2. How does it feel to frame your life and practice as “the resurgence of wholeness in a time of fragmentation”? Does this feel accurate to your experience? Does it shine a light on aspects of practice that you have tended to neglect?
3. In this chapter I write, “All conscious beings tend to contract, to recoil, to shut down and close off from the challenges of mortal existence. We reenact our incomplete psychological processes, rooted in causes ranging from trauma, to attachment wounds, to addiction. Contraction is a deep pattern, even in the most well-adjusted individuals. And yet it is possible to observe and recognize the activity of contraction. Based on such recognition, with persistent, sustained practice, it becomes possible to relax the pattern—to open into greater awareness, freedom, courage, and functional capacity.” Thus, it is something we are actively *doing*, even if we don’t know it. In this formulation, what is called “ego” in many spiritual paths is a *present activity* not an entity. Does this resonate as true for you? Does it in any way shine new light on your moment-to-moment opportunity to practice?
4. All seeking or searching is motivated by a sense of lack—that something is missing, which one must then go find. But the experience of wholeness makes seeking unnecessary. A recognition of our true condition may take place in deceptively simple and subtle ways—such as a feeling of tacit trust or acceptance of life itself, in all its aspects. *Think of times when you, or someone you are close to, felt simple gratitude for the gift of life itself, without worry. Consider what you have done, or what you might do, to reinforce this perception of the all-rightness of life as it is. What then happens if one experiences suffering and harmful actions? Can we be grateful for the gift of life itself without suppressing difficult experiences?*
5. Great psychological insights and energy shifts (such as may be experienced at a seminar or retreat) can often result in great positive transformations and even exalted mystical states—for the moment, at least. *What usually happens to people long-term after such experiences? What does it take to ensure continued long-term transformation? What does that mean to you right now?(See pages 144–45.)*
6. The heart is not merely the seat of feeling; it has its own intelligence (pages 149–150). *What kinds of wisdom can you glean from listening to your heart? How can that wisdom contribute to your transformation? What are the virtues and qualities that are intuited primarily at the heart?*
7. Practice involves body, mind, spirit, and our emotional shadow. By engaging all of these types of practice as a matter of daily routine, we experience the benefits of *cross-training*. For example, studies (described on pages 156–57) have shown that various forms of physical training can very positively affect memory, happiness, focus, and the ability to meditate. *Consider how “personal”*

*practices relate to “social” practices in the domains of intimate relationship and civic participation (see page 160).*

8. Four “ways of being” (as described by Erhard and Jensen) are described on pages 167–69. *What are they?* These are practices focused on objective behavior (“doing”) rather than changing your interior states or attitudes (“being”). Can your practice become more integral by embracing one or more of these four ways of being? The fourth way described is “being a person of integrity.” *Although we will repeatedly fall short, we can still honor our word, even if we are unable to keep it (page 168 bottom). What does it mean to honor our word?*
9. As practitioners and activists, we must be both *responsible for* and *forgiving* of our inevitable lapses. It is easy to be too hard on yourself, but it is also easy to cut yourself too much slack and dissipate your serious intention to change. *How might it look (as a concrete description of your internal states) to practice **both** of these seemingly different attitudes? (See pages 172–73.)*

#### **Group Practice:**

- 1) Begin your book group meeting with a reading that evokes a felt sense of contact with the radical nature of practice. Here is a passage from this week’s chapter:

The knowledge of wholeness is most directly cultivated in meditation. In unitive states of consciousness people have direct intuitive experience of the nonseparate wholeness of all objective and subjective realities, or “awareness itself.” These intuitions are much more than a simple cognitive insight. They are experienced energetically, kinesthetically, emotionally, and cognitively. And they can therefore inform people’s ways of navigating, behaving, and relating. This often results in a shift of perspective into one in which life lives us, rather than the other way around. This depersonalization (recognizing that “I am awareness”), in which awareness is most free, does not produce dissociation, but instead relaxes resistance, completing a circuit back into an intimate, warm, personal, embodied experience of living.

These dynamics of contraction and expansion, of consciousness and unconsciousness, are always at play in life. This is true not just in individuals but in relationships and groups. Tendencies toward fragmentation contend with choices for integration. Tendencies toward disease and death contend with cycles of resurgent vitality and health. Corrupt impulses contend with aspirations to integrity. Courage contends with fear. Humility contends with arrogance. Life wounds us, and the body naturally heals. The universal principles of wholeness express themselves in every individual life, and in every moment.

The practice of wholeness is thus ongoing, and pervades every sphere of our lives. It means intending to enact the health and wholeness of the body, mind, emotions, relations, culture, society, and the entire natural world. It is also about participating consciously and constructively

in every dimension of the larger whole. Most important, integral practice expresses what is called an “ontological” stance, or a “way of being”—a core commitment that organizes the whole life. In that fundamental intention, the inner work and the outer work converge. Commitments give rise to actions, which change us, making us more capable of fulfilling our commitments, which deepen and evolve.

2) Then, take turns sharing.

Describe your practice as it has been up until now. Identify one or more ways that your relationship to practice is shifting, and how you are embodying a new level of commitment or responsibility. Ask yourself if there is some way your practice can be even more authentic or powerful—and check in—are you ready and willing to make a new choice here?

If possible, express your understanding in a simple concrete commitment, anchored in time and objective behavior, that you can express in a single succinct sentence.

3) Five to ten minutes before your end time, take turns sharing about how you learned something or expanded your view of things based on something one of your conversation partners shared.

### **Personal Practice**

Continue to do the practices we have been doing (this repeats from last week):

1. Expand your “Moments” practice, perhaps breathing to and from the heart in random moments throughout the day, and remembering and enjoying the radical “okayness” of existence.
2. Establish or deepen or lengthen or refresh your “Mornings” practice. Include, if possible, at least 10 minutes conscious movement and 10 more minutes of conscious stillness (meditation). Prepare space in your home and agreements with others in your household as necessary. Consider a level of commitment that you can sustain for the duration of this course.
3. Consider the ways in which your life does and does not reflect the Four Ways of Being a Leader described on pages 167-169. Identify one concrete choice you are ready to make to upgrade your practice commitment in behavioral terms.
4. Continue to engage conscious activism. Reach out and do something (however small) that is practical and concrete to positively influence politics in the place where you live.

If you live outside the USA and would like to influence US politics (which are in crisis and influence the whole world) even though you can’t donate to candidates or parties, you can

consider donating to US nonprofit organizations focused on the environment, civil liberties, gun control, indigenous communities, women's rights, racial justice, and/or many other key issues.

If you are in the United States and you have no ready connection to how you can help, consider going to <https://postcardstovoters.org> and register. Or work with another such program, called [Vote Forward](#).

Do you know anyone whose vote might help make a difference but who might NOT vote? Reach out such people. See if you can get them to commit to voting formally on <https://iwillvote.com>. Make a bigger or more regular political donation than you otherwise would. In whatever ways are congruent for you, start doing something, moving your body through time and space, to make a difference to our upcoming midterm elections. This will not only make a difference in the world, it will change your relationship to the larger issues we are discussing.