

Towards a political economy of enlightenment

Introduction

Enlightenment is expensive. Specifically, it's labour intensive: a reasonably solid human being could expect to do an hour a day of practice for twelve years, and substantially more intense practices for another two or three years, with a two year recovery period afterwards to have a reasonable shot at enlightenment. And a lot of traditional sources would say this is grossly optimistic.



Naval
@naval

Spirituality is a luxury good. In olden times, you had to lower your wants, first. In modern times, you can raise your means instead.

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And this is just for the people where things go pretty well. What about the people who get jammed up somewhere, stuck, or broken? If there is any substantial trauma, that is

also going to take work to fix. So a best case, assuming that people get to work seriously at 19, gives a 35 year old adept who will have sunk the majority of their life energy into this quest.

Let that sink in. And that's best case.

This was potentially doable when the world was relatively forgiving, or, rather, during the brief flare of world peace that we had in the 1990s. I started spiritual practice at 14, seated meditation using the Calm Technique, and maintained an hour+ a day practice until losing my internal dialogue after 8 years. Another few years of work with my guru tipped me over into the whole thing at 26. Several factors contributed to me moving a bit faster than the usual texts would suggest, mainly massive trauma and a lot of lineage support: I had the best healers that money could buy, and income to match for brief-but-critical periods.

Could I have done it in the north of England working a blue collar job? No. The people with the skills were not there, and they money to pay for them was not there, and the time was not there. Not just time, but the ability to focus on one thing to the exclusion of all others: no constantly being dragged down to the pub or otherwise made to play the game in one way or another. All of that drag costs momentum, which costs time, which costs success. This is the nature of the game.

Pricing enlightenment

phase of work	hours per day	cost per hour	total
12 years	2	12	US\$ 105,120
3 years (full time)	8	12	US\$ 105,120
2 years (recovery)	4	12	US\$ 35,040
incidentals	\$1000 per year	15 years	US\$ 15,000
	grand total at a	living wage (\$12)	US\$ 260,280

So let's examine this closely: even assuming a fairly fast track, we are looking at 17 years of latency before your New Adepts are ready to go, and it's a quarter of a million dollars of work to make this happen. The cost is pretty close to the US govt estimates on the cost of raising a child, in fact (233,000). I'm assuming an hour a day, plus longer sessions at weekends and recovery time for 12 years, and then a full time push (also reflecting weeks or months dealing with the super intense periods around full realisation.) In practice that might well be blended together over the latter part of the 12 years, as things build into a crescendo.

Yes, meditators could be doing large phases of this as a hobby - you don't watch TV, you have a spiritual practice. But let us be clear: this is labor. It's spiritual *work* and the hours spent meditating do not neatly stop when you get off the mat: there's a lot of integration and recovery time, endless days spent slightly fogged out as your unconscious mind reorganises and rearranges itself around some newly seen truth. The hard-crunch completion stages can be (and probably should be) completely debilitating - ripping up the final floorboards of the mind as a prelude to demolishing the building! Nobody could be or should be managing a department while doing that sort of spiritual practice. Maintaining a semblance of family life would be hard and hard enough, that's definitely one to do while the kids are at college.

If you can put in the time, and manage the world, and manage the kids.

Something is going to have to give.

Things that don't work

Lots of people have proposed faster approaches to getting people to enlightenment. None of them work. Permit me to explain.

Drugs

Although there's increasing evidence that drugs like MDMA can be used to help people recover from PTSD in a clinical context, this is not the kind of use of drugs which I am discussing. What I'm discussing is the attempt to use psychedelics for "conscious evolution" in the way that (for example) the various ayahuasca cults are engaged in, or the way that was a common aspiration in the 1960s.

There are two problems with drugs, as an accelerant to spiritual practice. The first is that, at the 30 year line, people with a fondness for psychedelic drugs appear to have aged much, much worse than the ones that stuck to beer and quit drinking when the hangovers got too bad.

Yes, career alcohol abuse is devastating, but we all knew that. The question is what about career use of psychedelics. My sense of the situation, having seen the 1990s psychedelic warlord contingent grow up, is that the results are pretty damn poor. People are broken, and quite unhappy, overall. Did their peers who stayed on the straight and narrow do better? Yes, I really think so. Yes I do.

The second problem is much worse than unacceptable wear and tear. The second problem is *fucking hippies*. There is a massive and pervasive problem of people being distracted by the various epiphenomenon of psychedelic consciousness - spirit communication, weird insights into the nature of space and time, playing with your chakras, and so on. None of these things are strongly correlated with success in meditation, and without a doubt can be distractions and often dangerous distractions at that. The most common problem seems to be conversion to the idea that drugs (rather than hard bloody work) are a spiritual path in and of themselves, and getting people to take drugs more often or with stronger intent is, in some way, contributing to a planetary awakening process.

Nothing could be further from the truth. It's a self-replicating meme, like an infection: the kinds of drug experiences which make people move vocal about wanting other people to take drugs spread like an influenza, whereas drug experiences which make people go back to the meditation mat will tend not to cause more drug experiences for third parties. It's basically advertising.

This is not to say that drugs are a priori bad for spiritual practice: plenty of shamanic traditions exist, and I'm not going to say that these people don't know what they are doing. But for people that are meditation-first types, there's just no evidence that the psychedelic revival is good for us.

Mass Awakening

This is **not** the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. While certainly there was some kind of new horizon made visible in the 1960s, that new horizon is as far from us today as it ever was.

If you want some stern proof of this, consider the fate of black Americans, who now live in worse relative poverty than black South Africans did during Apartheid. Actual progress of the kind envisaged in the 1960s was not only an abstract spiritual journey, but a direct and concrete trajectory towards a better way of life for all: no draft, no nukes, equal rights for blacks and gay people, and at the high end the vision of a world free from harsh economic realities, based on a gifting-type economy.

America manages all of this for less than 100,000 people per year (almost none of them black) for one week a year at Burning Man. And Burning Man *should be* the high water mark for this process, this conscious evolutionary journey, right? California goes out to the desert to party, the great festival, lots of mystical undertones and overtones (what are they burning again?), all manner of old hippies have deposited their wisdom and creativity into this project, and all the young hippies have gone out there to see the sunrise on a new age.

Then people go home, and pick up their jobs, and very, very little of the culture at burning man bleeds over. It's been safely compartmentalised. That is *there* and this is *here* and never the two shall meet. Plus *here* has seriously been getting mixed into *there* - I saw paid professional bouncers on art cars in 2018, and that was quite a wake up call, let me tell you. Paid staff, on art cars. To keep the riffraff off.

No mass awakening is coming. You've seen what happens at Burning Man (hell, just watch some documentaries, and figure out who you would and would not want to be stuck in a car for six hours with). Look at what happened with social media - a brief flowering of something

interesting about ten years ago, the early adopter early days, and now a vast swamp of aggressive idiots hacking away at each other's sense of reality with weaponised lies. If there was going to be any spark of a new planetary consciousness, it would have been there - people in Iowa and Uttar Pradesh getting to know each-other through Google Translate, learning about each-other's lives. The tools would certainly have made this possible.

But what we got was people yelling at each-other over their back yard fences, and frequently throwing bags of dog shit at each-other's garden gnomes. Mass awakening is not coming.

And if it was, you would not like it.

Tantra

My own path was tantra - the skull kind, not the other kind. Actually there is no other kind: Californian-style "tantra" does none of the necessary root-chakra stabilisation work (i.e. the icky work of dealing with death) before it moves on to the "fun" sexuality stuff. But that stuff does *absolutely nothing of spiritual value* if the death work is not performed first, because unconscious fears around death will result in permanent addiction to sensuality, rather than a passage through and beyond sensuality, eventually towards immortality. As far as actual skull kind goes, a couple of people have made a disciplined attempt at teaching that, and their names have gone down in infamy.

So tantra is not happening, at least not at scale. And the overheads in terms of skilled teacher time, and people having damaging blowouts along the path more than nullify the likely benefits.

Brain Machines

I have no personal experience. I would strongly suspect similar performance characteristics to drugs and tantra: if people like it they

will get addicted, and if they don't like it, they won't do it. I apologise for this brutal critique, but I await data.

The Community

Western attempts to replicate extended family structures with non-genetically-related participants have historically run into a lot of problems. The commune movement broke on money and sexual politics, the intentional community movement and the ecovillage movement had similar problems, and the advent of polyamory and communities which are explicitly rooted in polyamory seem unlikely to solve these problems. It is my considered opinion that the strong "spiritual impulse towards community" that a lot of people seem to feel is largely driven by an unconscious desire to create a better environment with more adult support for their potential future children - i.e. it's an ethological desire much like the desire to have dance parties and co-ed camping trips. Some people have come to regard living in a community as a spiritual practice, and while it might require the patience of a saint to do so, it seems unlikely to *produce* such saints along the way. God knows people have tried.

Things that might work

Asexual / Single gender minimum wage monasteries

Here, we are indebted to the Cyber Hippie Totalism project, who aimed at ruthlessly reducing the cost of living for Free Software programmers by having fixed rules and strict discipline enabling many people to share a small, cheap space so they can *get some bloody work done*. Any resemblance to the Paper Street Soap Company from *Fight Club* is purely coincidental. At this point, of course, "single gender" does not really do what it once did: what we really mean is *none of the people in this house are remotely biologically attractive to any of the other people in this house*. I believe that The Temple ov Psychick Youth tried the inverse approach in the mid-1980s and onwards, with some success.

The trick here is that having *some* community support works. Most people's careers will suffer if they're running a side project as intense as trying to get enlightened (ask me why I didn't make more money in the 1990s). So they're likely to be earning a bit less than their peers, because in the short run at least cleaning up the consciousness doesn't produce results. It may produce *genius* later as focussed attention is brought to bear on problems that matter, but in the early years most people are going to find it to be a cost centre. The Tibetan Buddhist world is filled with "practice houses" which have a meditation/shrine room, and the people are all paying a little more than rent would usually cost for use of that room. People are often vegetarian and sharing cooking tasks etc. also.

So it's not like there aren't templates for this, although they're usually not quite so explicit about managing the sexual politics as I think is probably necessary for long term stability. It's easy to imagine this hybridising with other modern performance-enhancement cultures (house buys a sheep at a time keto diet optimisers, bodyweight gym people, even yoga, and so on). If these things were networked to a degree, and perhaps even unionised, it's possible to imagine pooled funds and possibly group negotiations for health insurance etc, a little like a modernised version of the Masonic Lodges in the era when they functioned as insurance syndicates.

But how do you differentiate between serious practitioners and dilettantes? If there is to be resource pooling and mutual support, how is a border to be put on this resource pool? Is that a house at a time, so there isn't much to take and little organisation is required to protect it, or is something more comprehensive required? Plus people age. They might get real jobs, they might have kids. And does a system which is meant to liberate the hard workers for more heavy practice clog up with damaged people who want those walls for shelter, rather than for support to build a higher level?

Still, given the number of reasonably successful attempts in this general direction, plus the ever-growing number of laptop jockeys and rootless global nomads, this seems to be worth serious further consideration. It is worth a try.

Slower Paths, or starting the work in middle age

Nobody said this had to be done quickly. The maximum speed 12 year hard push and three years of losing your mind trajectory (from which most people would of course individually deviate a lot anyway) might not be optimal for the conditions we find ourselves under. Perhaps the traditional householder route of not doing the really heavy spiritual stuff until after your kids move out of the house has more promise here - enough money in the bank that people can manage some of the slings and arrows themselves, for starters. In the first phase of life, when dealing with the kids etc, people would focus more on therapy and meditations of a kind which keep the body in good shape and the spirit strong, and the really heavy deconstruction would happen in the later phase of life as would be the norm for householder yogis.

The advantage this path has is that a lot of people who got going heavily in the 1990s and then went off to have kids are now on some approximation of this trajectory. If you were 30 in 2000, you're 50 now, and the kids are well on their way out of the house. There may well be a largely latent population who are about to come online with some possibility of getting real spiritual work done now that their kids are out of the house. That's a lot of people who's parents were hippies in the 1960s and then settle down and had kids through the 1970s getting into a position where their feet are starting to be clear and they can possibly get some work done once they get rid of these blessed teenagers.

So that might be a population to watch, with a lot of potential, a lot of resources, and maybe some free time. A bunch of retirement-age grey dog eco-hippie meditating Gen Xers might be a very nice compliment

for the 17 year old "post 9/11" environmental gloomers led by Greta Thunberg and the Extinction Rebellion gang.

This doesn't solve any of the problems of young people who want to get moving fast and get some real spiritual work done (all twelve of them) but it might be worth seriously considering that much of the push is actually being directed to the wrong generation to make real progress fast: a lifetime of experience and some way to pay the bills is a hell of a leg up on youth and willpower. And many of them will already have carved away a lot of the preliminary material through practice. Maybe somebody should be looking at putting together a 10 year syllabus for Gen X people that finally have the time to take a serious crack at dedicated spiritual practice. Having seen the world turn completely to shit in the middle of their lifetimes is probably a very, very sound foundation for real spiritual practice, too.

Laptops in Asia

Decent indigenous traditions, and a lot of potentially useful new age therapeutic stuff, in cheap jurisdictions with plentiful wifi and food. There must be half a million people doing this already (I wonder how you would count them) but without any notion of a really serious "our goal is to become enlightened" aim, it's very clear that a lot of them will drift off into capitalism, reproduction, or other more conventional trajectories.

But, in terms of squaring the circle and getting the time, energy and focus to maintain a heavy practice, finding a cheaper way to live in a basic way while so much of the productive energy goes into the inner work is the way to go, and maybe this is that way for many aspirants of the upcoming generations. Quality local meditation teaching from authentic lineages is not to be sneezed at!

The Way forwards

If there is any relationship between spirituality and human survival in the age to come, it is very clear that modern spirituality has let humanity down in the worst possible way. The priestly and monastic traditions have almost universally failed to adapt quickly enough or boldly enough to the Age of Extinction, starting with the lacklustre support for the anti-nuclear movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, moving through the various sectarian conflicts in which Buddhism or Hinduism participated, and on to the rivers of blood which nobody seems able to staunch, right into the ethical, ecological and technological crises of the modern day.

If these traditions are supposed to matter to humanity, they better pull their bloody socks up and rise to the occasion, because this shitshow is unacceptable. It's not producing results on anything like the scale required to feel like it's making a tangible difference to our chance of going extinct, or the rate at which we drive everything else extinct around us. We have a problem.

There are some green shoots. Monastic Academy is a big deal. Hinduism in India is going through ructions around its involvement in politics, but if a successful way forwards is found there, we might yet see some of those traditional sacred values reflected in government policy. Unlikely as that seems today, it does seem to be coming (at least in principle.) But in terms of the hardcore work of producing an enlightenment which is fit for the modern age, the paths are few, the funding is scarce, and the efforts are pale compared to the onslaught we face as the geopolitical situation we all face comes to a head.

Maybe it is the role of enlightened people to be ornamental and useless while their species dies, or turns monstrous and strips their planet of so much of its beautiful life. But I don't think so. I think we have a role, and a leading role, if we can get off our arses to play it.

We have to solve the practice problem. We have to make it possible for effective human beings to master the spiritual traditions which they are inheriting, in a world which moves ten or a hundred times faster than the world did when these traditions were invented. We have to rejig the traditions to operate in an age of unpredictable surprise and discontinuous change, against a background of exponential processes, both destructive and creative. We get ever closer to being able to live from the sun, wind and water alone, but the race between the energy sources which will destroy us and those which will sustain us is not yet won. There is so much to do, so little time, and so few hands to do it.

We, as teachers, have to figure out how to teach better, to teach faster, and to teach something that works for the age we are in. Future generations of students may live two hundred or four hundred years, and perhaps then the slow approaches can be made to work. But here and now, the challenge to raising the consciousness of the next wave of spiritual practitioners is time, money, and tradition. I think I've sketched out some of the problems in an effective way in this document, although it feels like I'm just wiping a brush over the surface of water.

I've said very little about ways that our global plight might accelerate spiritual practice. It might, and there are ways: the urgency which comes with watching what you love destroyed is there in us, as we watch the world chewed over by human greed and (even more) by incompetence. The presence of death which so informs some traditions can be seen on a grander scale than ever before all around us, but particularly around the nuclear weapons. There is yet room to teach for the age that we are in.

And maybe that will take five years and a hundred grand off the bill for getting people to see the truth of things, and their own existence.

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