

Performing Meditation: Vipassana and Zen as Technologies of the Self

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to reflect on technologies of the self, a term coined by Michel Foucault to study western practices of self-formation. Influenced by his work on subjectivity and by Science and Technology Studies (STS), I explore two forms of meditation – Vipassana meditation in the tradition of S. N. Goenka and Thich Nhat Hanh’s practices of mindfulness – in order to analyze the entanglements between technologies, associations and subjectivity.

Two research questions guided this study. First, how do Vipassana and Zen assemblages bring forth subjective transformations? Second, what are the politics of meditation practice, considering that Vipassana and Zen perform particular paradigms of subjectivity and aim at transforming the “social”?

In order to address these questions, I relied on qualitative research methods, developing a multifaceted methodology that included participant observation at four meditation retreats, semi-structured interviews with meditators, the analysis of relevant literature and my own personal experiences as a beginner.

I argue that the mechanisms of subjectification employed by meditation rely on two main devices: the transformation of habitual webs of associations, including couplings between selves, other humans, nonhumans and spaces and the installation of new automatisms. Vipassana and Zen technologies invite subjects to become aware of particular automatisms – regular ways of eating, sitting, walking and breathing - and to direct their attention towards them in novel ways, installing specific ways of managing their selves (stopping and breathing whenever they hear the sounds of bells; developing an attitude of equanimity when they are looking for sensations in their bodies).

Vipassana and Zen are mediators that generate new experiences and ways of being informed by meditation, as well as a number of social applications that rely on the paradigmatic changes enacted by these practices. Informed by the dualism between modern and nonmodern, I argue that Zen and Vipassana can be understood as technologies of the nonmodern self (Pickering,

2010), suspending the dualism between body and mind, self and others, humans and nonhumans, contributing towards the establishment of nondual paradigms of selfhood and innovative forms of social organization that include new ways of performing human reformation, social action and human-environment couplings.

The theoretical contributions of this dissertation are threefold. First, I want to extend current STS scholarly work on the self. Second, I want to contribute towards a post-humanist understanding of meditation assemblages. Finally, I am informed by Michel Foucault's insights on technologies of the self to study meditation, but instead of focusing on the history or genealogy of the western self, I analyze a number of devices of subjectification mobilized to operate subjective changes and to transform the social.

Keywords: Technologies of the Self; Meditation; Zen; Vipassana; Subjectification

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I. INTRODUCTION

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.” (Suzuki, 1970: 21)

“Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select.” (Watson, 1930: 82)

I.I FOUCAULT GOES TO JAPAN

In 1978, while working on the history of Christian discipline, Michel Foucault went to the Zen temple of Seionji at Uenohara, Japan. He discussed with the priests and monks the current state of western philosophy and practiced meditation. He summarized his experiences in the following way:

“If I have been able to feel something through the body’s posture in Zen meditation, namely the correct position of the body, then that something has been new relationships which can exist between the mind and the body and, moreover, new relationships between the body and the external world.” (Foucault, 1999a: 112-3)

Foucault’s words highlight the importance of relationality, of new associations between mind, body and the external world. As in traditional Japanese Zen practice, he must have sat in silence, focusing his attention on the breath (probably counting it, since he was a “beginner”), with his legs crossed and the spine straight. Most likely, an elder monk corrected his posture to allow him to have a glimpse of the Zen experience.¹

¹ Some years earlier Foucault had tried LSD at Zabriskie Point, so he was not necessarily inexperienced in consciousness exploration (Miller, 1993).

Some years after this experience, Foucault dedicated his yearly course at the Collège de France (between 1981 and 1982) to the study of the hermeneutics of the subject (Foucault, 2006). Drawing upon early Greek and Christian philosophy, he analyzed the transformation of discourses and practices of the self, illustrating the interconnection between exercises (spiritual exercises, as put by Hadot, 1995) and different understandings of subjectivity. In the fall of 1982, he went to the University of Vermont and gave a highly popular seminar on “Technologies of the Self” (Foucault, 1988), presenting his research on practices of self-formation in ancient culture.

Foucault had acquired notoriety by unveiling the logics of power permeating a variety of mechanisms, including prisons, schools, medical and psychiatric institutions. His “micro-physics of power” (Foucault, 1987) had the merit of revealing how power, as a strategy, is enacted in micro, molecular spheres, apparently contrasting with macro apparatuses such as the State. Could we interpret this new interest in technologies of the self as an attempt to illustrate how practices of self-formation were, once again, forms of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980)?

Although these practices also illustrate the relational and strategic dimension of power (Foucault, 1987b), they clarify the practical nature of ancient philosophy as a mode of being (Foucault, 1987b) or way of life (Hadot, 1995). Philosophy was a practice of freedom, a form of spirituality - a term that, according to Foucault, “refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations to which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being.” (Foucault, 1987b:125).

Following Foucault’s insights, this dissertation explores two modes of being (Vipassana and Zen) supported by a practice called meditation. Meditation is a difficult concept to define (Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971), but it can be understood as referring to “a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a nonanalytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought” (Shapiro, 1984:6).

There are forms of meditation in practically all spiritual traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism (Goleman,

1996). What is common to all these practices is the attempt to transform one's habitual reactions and to radically alter the sense of selfhood and the experience of the world; therefore, meditation is "a persistent effort to detect and become free from all conditioning, compulsive functioning of mind and body, habitual emotional responses that may contaminate the utterly simple situation required by the participant" (Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971: 9).

Meditation, as a mode of being, requires subjects to engage in a variety of activities to change themselves, transforming their habitual automatisms² and allowing the emergence of new ways of being, reminding us of Foucault's trip to the Zen monastery: one has to go to a particular place, turning the attention to the breath (or to particular parts of the body), maintaining silence, keeping a particular body posture and following a set of rules – hopefully, these alterations unveil new realms of experience and of being in everyday life.

I.II MEDITATION AND THE SELF

Meditation, as a form of self-shaping, allows us to engage in a discussion on the self. The self, and its relation to social worlds, is a long standing topic of sociological discussion (see Callero, 2003; Stets and Burke, 2003; Burkitt, 2008), including the entanglements between mind, self and society (Mead, 1934), the role of the self in repeating and maintaining certain dispositions in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977) or in performing social roles (Goffman, 1969). Meditation, according to Foucault, is a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988). This "technological understanding" allows me to tackle meditation as a form of self-shaping that requires particular body postures, gazes, modes of awareness and particular associations with materials and spaces to perform subjectivities. Instead of framing meditation within the so-called New Religious Movements (Dawson, 2003) or New Age (Heelas, 1996) practices, linked to particular historical processes, I am interested in understanding how bodies and minds are transformed to mobilize new forms of experiencing the self and the world

² See chapter II for a comprehensive exploration of this concept.

and how these new configurations unveil a variety of new possibilities understood as emergent phenomena (Pickering, 1993), linked to technologies of meditation.

This focus on technology, inspired by authors such as Foucault and Sloterdijk (2013)³, is strengthened by scholarly work in Science and Technology Studies (STS). STS have focused on the role played by nonhumans, performances and associations concerning scientific practice (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Callon, 1986; Pickering, 1995; Verbeek, 2005). Regarding subjectivity, STS has also highlighted how new devices, substances and spaces contribute to the formation of new kinds of selves (Haraway, 1991; Schull, 2005; Hennion and Goumart, 1999; Rose, 1998; Suchman, 2007; Brenninkmeijer, 2010; Verbeek, 2011). Humans, therefore, become entangled with materials and new associations, and Haraway's Cyborg (Haraway, 1991) illustrates contemporary couplings between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture.

Foucault's work on the self included the genealogy of forms of western subjectivity (although his Zen-becoming suggests that he could turn his attention to other practices if he hadn't died at such a young age); the previously mentioned sociological reflections on the self mostly focus on how "societies" shape humans and how these perpetuate themselves through performances and habits, while STS remarks on the self deal mostly with associations between humans and "western" technologies, including neurofeedback devices (Brenninkmeijer, 2010), pharmaceutical drugs (Rose, 2007) or gambling machines (Schull, 2005). An exception is Goumart and Hennion's article (1999) on devices of attachment that brilliantly expands STS reflections to the study of the self in relation to drug use and music⁴.

Although STS is mostly concerned with contemporary applications of technoscience, it provides a strong alternative to humanist approaches towards practice and technology by focusing on the role played by materials, spaces, performances and associations. According to Pickering, the humanist understanding of reality, including traditional sociology (such as sociology of

³ See chapter II.

⁴ The insights of Goumart and Henion are highly relevant to my research and will be explored in detail in chapter II.

science) “identifies human scientists as the central seat of agency” (Pickering, 1993: 562). A post-humanist understanding of (scientific) practice, as in Actor Network Theory (ANT), (Latour, 2005) or the Mangle of Practice (Pickering, 1995), acknowledges the “role for nonhuman- or material, as I will say- agency in science. Science and technology are contexts in which human agents conspicuously do not call all the shots” (Pickering, 1993: 562).

As stated by Pickering, “we need a *posthumanist* social theory, one that recognizes from the start that the contours of material and human agency reciprocally constitute one another” (Pickering, 2001: 173). Pickering’s insight is linked to new, post-humanist ways of conceiving the “social” that should take into account the role of materiality and nonhumans (Latour, 2005). These insights, emerging from STS, allow me to understand technologies of the self such as meditation not only as performances that alter subjects and their connections to the world but also as assemblages⁵ requiring new associations with nonhuman agents. This includes different settings, techniques, materials and the transformation of human automatisms, habitual workings of the human body/mind (not linearly “controlled” by human practitioners).

This means that, instead of framing practices of meditation within broader historical or sociological aspects, such as forms of detraditionalization (Heelas, 1996b) (including the previously mentioned “new age” or “new religious movements”), I am particularly interested in the material, performative, spatial and regulatory aspects of technologies of the self. Humanist approaches to meditation turn it into a mere reflection of contemporary expressivism, authenticity, neo-romanticism or New Age (York, 1995; Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaf, 1996) – these reduce meditation to a mere consequence of

⁵ The notion of assemblage will be widely used in this dissertation. In order to explain it, Deleuze and Guattari use the example of books: “A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an assemblage.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 3-4)

historical and sociological trends that in turn “change” human identity as well as the social meaning of meditation. A paradigmatic example is McMahan’s book “The Making of Modern Buddhism”. He argues that modern forms of meditation have lost their traditional meaning and have been appropriated by contemporary regimes of subjectivity:

“Rather than exclusively a means of achieving awakening in a traditional sense, it [meditation] has in some cases been reconfigured as a technique for self-discovery, self-discipline, self-transformation, and physical and mental health outside of doctrinal and sectarian formulations.” (McMahan, 2008: 184)

According to McMahan, this modern appropriation of meditation is linked to the “Subjective Turn”, beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, creating a new type of selfhood linked to increased self-reflexivity, “making one’s experience an explicit object of reflection and becoming aware of self-awareness itself” (McMahan, 2008: 188). Instead of analyzing what happens when meditation is performed, these studies frame this technology of the self within broader social and historical structures, usually ignoring new associations, performances, experiences, and innovative social applications.

Following Latour, one could argue that these approaches reflect traditional modes of reasoning of social scientists, displaying a tendency to translate empirical material into broader, general frameworks reflecting particular historical forces/structures that participants (interviewees, informants, etc.) are usually unaware of:

“Too often, social scientists – and especially critical sociologists – behave as if they were ‘critical’, ‘reflexive’, and ‘distanced’ enquirers meeting a ‘naive’, ‘uncritical’, and ‘un-reflexive’ actor. But what they too often mean is that they translate the many expressions of their informants into their own vocabulary of social forces. The analyst simply repeats what the social world is already made of.” (Latour, 2005: 57)

Instead of analyzing meditation from the point of view of broader historical or social forces, reducing it to an expression of some general trend or idea – such as romanticism or reflexivity - , I will develop a post-humanist analysis of Vipassana and Zen practices, understood as technologies that

require new associations between humans, nonhumans, environments and performances, allowing different forms of experiencing and of being in the world to emerge. This means that, instead of framing meditation within the broad category of “religion” (including contemporary variants of Buddhism), this dissertation will explore transformations of selfhood linked to new associations that transform realms such as human experience, everyday life or the management of social “issues”, analyzing the multiple enactments of meditation.

Technologies and aspects of morality, ethics, risks and politics are closely connected (see, for instance, Beck, 1992; Feenberg and Hannay, 1995; Callon et al., 2001; Verbeek, 2011). Regarding technologies of subjectivity, these assume many forms - education, media, the configuration of the workplace or of the domestic space, the design of cities and medicine. Technologies are everywhere, which means that, following a post-humanist understanding of the social, we are constantly being “fabricated” and performed through associations with materials, performances and spaces. Our “modes of being”, as put by Foucault, are entangled with these heterogeneous formations.

Much has been written on “modern selves” from anthropological, historical, philosophical, and sociological perspectives. Notions such as discipline (Foucault, 1995), narcissism (Lasch, 1979), liquidity (Bauman, 2000), entrepreneurialism (Foucault, 1991; Burchell, 1996); individualism (Dumont, 1986); reflexivity (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) and dualism (Pickering, 2010) are salient⁶. Technologies of the self such as meditation have political consequences, enacting particular paradigms of subjectivity, modes of being in the world. As Kuhn wrote:

“The term “paradigm” is used in two different senses. On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science.” (Kuhn, 1962: 175)

⁶ A more comprehensive discussion will be provided in chapter II.

Initially, one could interpret Kuhn's words as humanist, the paradigm as a set of beliefs shared by a "community", with the second formulation of the word referring to a shared mode of scientific practice. However, Kuhn's notion of paradigm suggests that practices and forms of reasoning are interwoven, and that ultimately the set of performances deployed by scientists (but also by "lay people" in general) produce certain versions of the world.

STS have provided a number of interesting notions that condense the interplay between practices and the enactment of versions of the world, including ontological politics (Mol, 1999; Law, 2004), politics of ontology (Pickering, 2010), performativity (Callon, 2006), ecology of practices (Stengers, 2005) and cosmopolitics (Stengers, 2010). Consequently, when we are writing about practices of self-formation, we are exploring forms of enacting particular versions of subjectivity and of the world, raising the issue of politics – if technologies enact versions of worlds and selves, which versions are being performed through these practices?

Following Foucauldian analyses of the self and STS concerns with ontology and practice, this dissertation explores Vipassana and Zen technologies, analysing how paradigm shifts in subjectivity are enacted, reflecting on the politics of these technologies and expanding STS scholarly work on the self.

I.III THE CASE STUDIES

Although I previously stated I wanted to demarcate myself from those approaches that seem to focus on generalizations to study technologies of the self such as meditation, these practices have histories and contexts, and they do not emerge out of nowhere. The practices studied by Foucault (2006) were linked to a variety of different philosophical schools in the West, such as Stoicism, Epicureanism or Platonism.

While there are some interesting attempts to readapt these practices to contemporary times⁷, the practices of meditation I will analyze are linked to what is commonly called “Buddhism”, dealing with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in North India in the 6th Century BC. In a nutshell, the practices of meditation developed by Siddhartha aimed at the cessation of human suffering. There are four noble truths or principles that are usually elicited to summarize Buddhism. The First Noble Truth deals with suffering (*dukkha*) – life is suffering and pain. The second noble truth states that *dukkha* arises due to craving and desire (*tanha*). The third noble truth affirms that it is possible to overcome suffering through the extinction of craving. The fourth noble truth consists of the path leading to the cessation of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path – Right Understanding; Right Thought; Right Speech; Right Action; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; Right Concentration (Rahula, 1959: 16-45).

Another important issue concerning the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama is the fact that he suggested that there is no such thing as an independent self, no “permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world” (Rahula, 1959: 51). This obviously raises some concerns – how can we understand forms of meditations as “technologies of the self” if there is no such thing as the self⁸? The insight of no-self (*anatta*) is not given *a priori*, rather depends on the development and continuation of these practices that eventually suspend habitual ways of experiencing the self – as suggested in chapter VI, these realizations should be understood as performative.

A fundamental tenet of Buddhism is Nirvana, the ultimate truth, bringing forth a radically new version of reality; it is “the realization that the substratum of existence is a Voidness out of which all things ceaselessly arise and into which they endlessly return, that this Emptiness is positive and alive and in fact not

⁷ There was an interesting initiative that took place at the University of Exeter called “Be stoic for a week”, co-organized by Patrick Ussher, a PhD student in Classics <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/28/stoic-week-stiff-upper-lip> (Retrieved: 12/04/2013)

⁸ Interestingly, when I was explaining my work to a Buddhist monk, he immediately told me – “But there is no self!” We both laughed afterwards.

other than the vividness of a sunset or the harmonies of a great symphony.” (Kapleau, 1989: 16)

In order to study meditation as a technology of the self, I identified two case studies, two “schools” of meditation that are widely disseminated in the West. These schools promote the practice of meditation (in both cases, linked to what is usually called “Buddhism”, although regarding one of the case studies – Vipassana - these links are questioned⁹), offering to those who attend their retreats or practice centres the possibility of attaining different modes of being and of experiencing themselves. These new modes of being are attained through the transformation of habitual associations with spaces, materials, performances and regulations.

The first case study is Vipassana, a form of Insight meditation, taught by S. N. Goenka. This tradition is linked to Theravada Buddhism¹⁰ (the only surviving school of a group of schools which was called Hinayana), belonging to the orthodox forms of Buddhism followed in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia or East Pakistan (Rahula, 1959: viii).

Vipassana is characterized as a “practical way to examine the reality of one’s own body and mind, to uncover and solve whatever problems lie hidden there, to develop unused potential, and to channel it for one’s own good and the good of others” (Hart, 1987: 6). Vipassana is a term that is usually used to classify the set of practices of meditation that do not only focus exclusively on mental concentration (*samatha*), but actually generate “Insight into the nature of things, leading to the complete liberation of mind, to the realization of the Ultimate Truth, Nirvana.” (Rahula, 1959: 68)

The type of Vipassana prescribed by Goenka aims to transform selves through the observation of sensations. Goenka started practicing Vipassana during the 1950’s with U Ba Khin of Burma and in 1969 he led his first 10-day course in India. Afterwards, many people became interested in Vipassana, and in 1979 Goenka started teaching in different locations around the globe

⁹ The Vipassana organization doesn’t assume itself as “Buddhist”, since Vipassana is not considered a religion but a technique – see chapter V.

¹⁰ Theravada can be translated as “Path of the Elders” (Ellwood and McGraw, 1999: 135).

(Goenka, 1998: vii-viii). Nowadays, there are approximately 120 Vipassana centres worldwide and it is estimated that more than 100,000 people attend these courses every year.

Vipassana is taught in a controlled setting, the meditation retreat, requiring subjects to abandon their habitual associations, submitting themselves to new spatial, performative and material configurations. The homogeneity of these retreats, ideally enacted in the same way all over the world, will allow me to look at the 10-day courses as mechanisms deployed to create new paradigms of selves. These mechanisms also have social/political ramifications, being mobilized to “reform” prisoners across the world (see chapter VIII).

The second case study comprises the set of practices promoted by the Order of Interbeing¹¹, formed in Vietnam in 1960 by the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Born in central Vietnam in 1926, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk at the age of sixteen. His teacher was the Zen master Thich Chan That, belonging to the Lam Te Zen school, including both Theravada and Mahayana traditions¹² (Chapman, 2007: 299). In 1961, he went to the United States to study and teach comparative religion at Columbia and Princeton. In 1963, he returned to Vietnam to help his monk-colleagues in stopping the civil war after the fall of the Diem regime by applying principles of nonviolence (Hanh, 1995: X). Due to his political involvement, he was later refused permission to return to Vietnam (Hanh, 1995: xii). His current residence, the Plum Village Monastery, is located near Bordeaux, France and was founded in 1982. For the past 30 years it has attracted thousands of visitors.¹³

¹¹ See chapter V for a comprehensive explanation of what Interbeing means.

¹² According to Rahula, Mahayana is a later development of Buddhism, and it is followed in countries such as China, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia (Rahula, 1959: viii). It contrasts with Theravada in the sense that it postulates that “enlightenment is a achievable goal for all humans, in this lifetime, here and now” (Gregory and Sabra, 2008). Zen is a form of Mahayana Buddhism, and its origins go back to the first patriarch, Bodhidharma, a 6th century Indian. (Reps, 2000: 15). The first Vietnamese school of Zen was founded by Vinitaruci in 580 CE (Kit, 2002: 148).

¹³ Plum Village is comprised of four main Hamlets: Upper Hamlet (for male monastics, male visitors and couples), Lower and New Hamlet (for female visitors and monastics) and Son Ha (for male monks and visitors).

Thich Nhat Hanh is widely known for promoting “engaged Buddhism”, defined by King as “a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political, social and ecological problems of society” (King, 2009: 1). Thich Nhat Hanh’s proposal is not only engaged because he was particularly active and influential during the Vietnam War (see chapter VIII) but also because his approach to Buddhist practice advocates the application of mindfulness – moment to moment awareness - to everyday life activities. In 1954, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a series of articles called “A Fresh Look at Buddhism”, where he developed the idea of engaged Buddhism (Hanh, 2008d: 30), “Buddhism that is present in every moment of our daily life (Hanh, 2008d:31) and “that responds to anything that happens in the here and the now” (Hanh, 2008d: 31), including social, political, psychological and environmental issues causing suffering to humans and nonhumans.

This case study will be particularly useful to understand how everyday life activities are transformed in order to support a mode of being (mindfulness) and how technologies of meditation are mobilized to achieve particular social outcomes, including “peace” and supposedly less destructive and hegemonic relationships between humans and the environment.

These two case studies are relatively popular and well known forms of meditation in the West. If you live in Europe, the US, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, there is probably a Vipassana practice centre relatively close to you, as well as a sangha – a community – of those practicing meditation according to the instructions of Thich Nhat Hanh. My fieldwork was, therefore, conducted in Europe – England, France and Portugal – and the vast majority of participants (those I interviewed) were westerners – Portuguese, American, Irish, Dutch and British - and lay “followers”, not monks or nuns. In some cases, these participants were even beginners.

The inclusion of westerners and beginners in this study supports my general concern with modes of being, allowing me to reflect on how subjectivities are transformed along with new practices, spaces and material associations. The struggles of some of these participants with the practice can, following Kuhn, be understood as illustrations of a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn, 1962)

or struggles of agency between two modes of existence, the nonmeditative one and the “cultivated”, meditative mode of being, whether it’s Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen or Goenka’s Vipassana.

The differences between meditative and nonmeditative modes of being allow me to contrast the ontological politics of Zen and Vipassana with the regular, nonmeditative world. This process of “triangulation” can, obviously, fail for being too abstract or generic; however, it will serve to illustrate how these practices contrast between themselves and conventional forms of performing the self, with ramifications on experience, everyday life and social phenomena.

I.IV RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

There are two questions guiding my research. First, how do these traditions (Vipassana and Zen) bring forth new paradigms of selfhood? Second, what are the ontological politics (Mol, 1999) of these new versions of selves? Following post-humanist STS, I suggest that these practices of meditation rely on a variety of heterogeneous devices to reconfigure subjectivities, involving new webs of associations and performances. These new associations are met with various resistances, obliging practitioners to struggle with their habitual automatisms to train themselves in meditation. If these struggles are dealt with (including pain, boredom, sleepiness or restlessness), new realms of human experience can be unveiled, transforming everyday life conduct, expanding the human potential and inspiring alternative ways of dealing with issues such as human reformation, the ecological crisis or social activism.

This means two things. Firstly, these practices have to be studied from a post-humanist perspective – it is not enough to look at human motives (including the reasons leading people to meditate), interactions (between practitioners or between students and teachers) or broader historical/social trends to understand meditation. In order to study these practices we have to analyze how spaces are reconfigured, objects are used, performances are

altered and struggles take place – in sum, how new connections between humans, nonhumans, spaces, regulations and practices are enacted, replacing former couplings. Secondly, I suggest these practices of Zen and Vipassana are alternatives to dominant, dualist ways of conceiving associations between body and mind or self and environment, and through these performances new realms of reality can be unveiled, perhaps offering us more imaginative and enriching ways of being in the world. If, according to Pickering, the ontology of cybernetics is nonmodern, since it “goes with a performative understanding of the brain, mind and self... which undoes the familiar Western dualism of mind and matter” (Pickering, 2010: 13), meditation can be understood as a technology of the nonmodern self (Pickering, 2010), reinventing what people can experience and re-imagining forms of intervention in the world, constituting an alternative to modern and dualist forms of selfhood. Human modes of being are transformed by meditation, allowing the emergence of nonmodern archipelagos, with ramifications on experience, everyday life and social action. These ontologies will be contrasted with modern ways of being in the world, that in STS are usually considered dualist and dichotomous (Latour, 1991a; Haraway, 1991; Stengers, 2008; Pickering, 2010), reinforcing the divide between body and mind, self and others, nature and culture, people and things. Following this dualist ontology, influenced by Cartesian dualism, modern subjectivity corresponds to the “self-contained individual, dualistically opposed to other selves and the material world, a center of reason, calculation, planning, and agency; and measured against such a yardstick dreamers and madmen are defective selves” (Pickering, 2010: 74).

I argue that the practices of Zen and Vipassana meditation, through the establishment of new sets of associations and performances, suspend this dualist paradigm of the self, belonging to the set of “techniques that do enable us to make the Jamesian jump towards forces we were separated from” (Stengers, 2008: 58). Meditation will, therefore, be understood as an alternative to modern ways of being in the world, and I argue, following post-humanist STS, that it is through new webs of associations (with materials, techniques, spaces and regulations) that these new modes of being are performed.

I.V WHY MEDITATION?

Finally, and as it will become clear in chapter III, my interest in meditation is not merely academic. Although Foucault's work on technologies of the self and STS literature on ontology and performativity made me realize it would be interesting to study transformative technologies, coupling personal and social transformation with new practices and performances, I was also curious about new ways of experiencing my "own" subjectivity. My existential curiosity as a teenager led me to enrol in Philosophy at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, abandoning my initial plans to study Economics. After years of studying the history of western philosophy, I became progressively frustrated with the abstract nature of the discipline, and realized that in order to "change myself" I would have to turn my attention to other practices that go beyond the discursive realm. After I started practicing Yoga to deal with back pain, aggravated by the perils of sedentary life, I discovered how the breath, attention and particular postures can unveil new experiences and realities. As I was researching the public perception of nanotechnologies for my MA, I realized that perhaps a PhD dissertation on meditation would allow me to, at least, become acquainted with new practices of the self. This dissertation emerges as the result of that innocent decision.

I.VI DISSERTATION OUTLINE

This dissertation is organized in the following fashion:

Chapter II (Meditation, Technologies of the Self and STS) is the literature review. It elaborates on three different branches of scholarly work directly relevant to this dissertation: meditation research; Foucauldian reflections on the self and STS literature on relationality, performativity and ontological politics. Concerning meditation research, I provide a historical background of some of the most relevant topics that arose during the last 40 years and I focus on sociological and anthropological analyses of meditation. Regarding the section on Foucault and the self, I initially explore his notion of "technologies of the self"

and its ramifications on forms of “creating” versions of people, such as performances, materials, spaces and power. Finally, the section on STS explores the entanglements between practices and ontology, highlighting the importance of relationality, with relevant consequences on how the self is understood. The section called “Interpretation” clarifies how these three branches of scholarly work are articulated to support my argumentative thread.

Chapter III (Methodology) explores the various methods I mobilized to address the aforementioned research questions. I explain how I used semi-structured interviews, participant observation at retreats, autoethnography, the analysis of relevant literature and other sources. I reflect on the importance of having first-hand experience with meditation and elicit the difficulties I encountered, namely with finding interviewees that practice Vipassana meditation and having access to that organization.

Chapter IV (Setting) analyzes meditation retreats as devices for the fabrication of subjectivities, drawing upon new material, legislative and spatial devices. Following my observations at Vipassana and Zen retreats, and influenced by Foucauldian and STS literature, I elaborate on the role of a variety of devices to bring forth new modes of being. These include rules, inscriptions, nonhumans and forms of spatial partitioning. Supported by the situationist notion of psychogeography, I argue that Zen and Vipassana assemblages reconfigure space to perform meditative kinds of people, contrasting meditation retreats with the outside world.

Chapter V (Performances) elaborates on Zen and Vipassana techniques of meditation. Supported by notions such as habits and automatisms (that will be explored in detail in chapter II), I suggest that the mobilization of these technologies of the self aims at breaking usual workings of the mind and body. This justifies the importance of sitting in certain ways and following particular programs that alter one’s awareness towards body parts, automatic workings (such as the breath), movements or nonhumans. In this chapter, the contrasts between Goenka’s Vipassana and Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen will be clear – Vipassana’s mode of being is supported by three technologies of the self, and

one should be sitting while practicing them, while Thich Nhat Hanh's version of engaged Buddhism applies meditation to a variety of everyday life activities.

Chapter VI (Experiences) draws upon the wide range of experiences linked to Zen and Vipassana practice, following semi-structured interviews with participants, my own experiences and relevant literature on the topic. This chapter is organized according to three major sections. The first section deals with what I call struggles of agency (inspired by Pickering's dances of agency and the dialectic of resistance and accommodation, see Pickering, 1995), and explores the difficulties faced by meditators in adapting to new paradigms of selfhood. The second section elaborates on the feeling of meditation – what happens when one supposedly overcomes the initial struggles and is able to practice mindfulness and Vipassana? Finally, the section on “mystical experiences” reflects on some transformative episodes shared by interviewees and advanced practitioners, exploring their politics and contrasting them with modern, dualist ways of being in the world.

Chapter VII (Meditation in everyday life) has two major sections. In the first section, I analyze how practitioners, after retreats are over, apply meditation in order to deal with a variety of situations, turning meditation into an equipment¹⁴ for everyday life. The second section explores some relevant transformations operated by meditation, contrasted with modern ways of being in the world. In order to support the hypothesis that meditation leads to a nonmodern version of selfhood, I explore three important aspects: the development of new forms of awareness; the enactment of an extended version of selfhood and the experience of nonstandard phenomena.

Finally, **chapter VIII** (Meditation and social change) explores social aspects of meditation. I focus on three examples that illustrate how meditation, as a technology of the self, is used to tackle “social issues” - the introduction of Vipassana courses in prisons; the role of technologies of mindfulness during Thich Nhat Hanh's lifetime struggle for peace; the links between meditation and ecology, including a reflection on Zen practices as forms of “mental ecology”

¹⁴ My understanding of equipment is influenced by Foucault's remarks on *paraskeue* (Foucault, 2006), see chapters II and VII.

(Guattari, 2000). This will be followed by the analysis of a procedure supported by meditation, called The Council of all Beings, that aims at overcoming anthropocentric and dualist modes of being; afterwards, I will explore the creation of an environmentalist political party in Portugal, partly influenced by the meditative insights of its leader.

II. MEDITATION, TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF AND STS

II.I INTRODUCTION

Meditation has already permeated mainstream popular culture. Meditation books can be easily found on the bookshelves of western libraries, usually in the spirituality, esotericism, Buddhism or Hinduism sections. Authors such as Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki or Philip Kapleau popularized this practice, and Thich Nhat Hanh's or the Dalai Lama's latest books are easily found in an airport bookstore.

Similarly, meditation research is a growing academic field. We have all heard of Matthieu Ricard, the happiest person on the planet, a monk whose brain and mood was studied and validated through technological devices (Lutz et al., 2004). This contrasts with early literature on the subject, which compared experiences with meditation to neurological pathologies such as catatonia (Alexander, 1931). Nowadays, meditation is not only studied by neuroscientists, neurophenomenologists, psychologists and contemplatives in general – it is even promoted and widely used by National Health Systems in the Western world, including Britain, following a secular adaptation of the practice called mindfulness.

Meditation is no longer a strange, off-the-wall technique that can only be explored by going to the Himalayas, India or Southeast Asia. It is already *here*, it has penetrated our universities, it allows family members to leave their homes and to attend retreats once or twice a year, it sparks in children's minds a natural curiosity to learn about themselves, it invites us to write about it.

The apparent popularity of meditation does not mean that it is "normalized". Joining a retreat implies a radical transformation of one's workings and habit patterns, clashing with regular, outside world devices to maintain and make up selves. Meditation, through the lenses of a sociological enquiry, helps us reflect on two relevant issues: firstly, the set of mechanisms that are

deployed to operate individual transformations – different spatial, material and performative arrangements are entangled to bring forth new ways of experiencing the self and the world; secondly, these forms of fabricating new versions of people are *political* – not only do they clash with dominant versions of subjectivity but they also sustain new ways of being in the world, including the transformation of interpersonal relationships, human/nonhuman couplings and supporting particular social/political projects.

My take on meditation is influenced by three different branches of scholarly work: firstly, meditation research – psychological research has focused on the phenomenological and emotional effects of meditation, revealing the wide range of states of consciousness that meditators go through, unveiling experiences and realities that seem awkward to the untrained, nonmeditative mind; sociological and anthropological approaches to meditation have focused on a variety of issues such as the role of training or real-world and political dimensions of meditation.

Secondly, my approach is highly influenced by Foucauldian reflections on selfhood. The notion of technologies of the self, his remarks on discipline and the fabrication of subjects allowed me to reflect on the highly productive nature of meditative practices, how spatial, material and performative arrangements enact particular versions of people. Meditation can only exist as an organized practice and way of life if it is supported by these networks – spaces carefully arranged, ways of managing the body and the mind, forms of actualizing meditation in daily life, etc. Foucault's remarks support the assumption that the creation of selfhood is eminently *technological* – practices of discipline and of self-care enact different types of people, meaning that subjectivity, environments, performances and knowledge (such as the disciplinary branch nowadays called the “human sciences”) are entangled to enact particular versions of selfhood.

This leads us to the third branch of scholarly work, STS, in particular literature dealing with relationality, performativity and ontological politics. I suggest that meditation not only draws upon new performances and webs of associations to enact paradigms of subjectivity but also that these versions of

people contrast with what in post-humanist STS is called the *modern*. Supported by Latour's and Pickering's notion of nonmodern, I suggest that meditation is a technology of the nonmodern self (Pickering, 2010), which allows me to analyze retreats not as off-the-wall and weird forms of social organization but as assemblages that require a suspension of normal, mainstream, dualist modern associations to bring forth a different self. In sum, Vipassana and Zen are instances of ontological politics – by recognizing the performativity of the world and subjects, they entangle performances, spaces, constraints and a set of devices to deploy meditative versions of selves and reality.

Therefore, this chapter situates this dissertation within these three major fields of scholarly work: meditation research; Foucauldian remarks on technologies of the self; STS discussions on relationality, performativity and ontological politics. A fourth section, entitled “Interpretation”, clarifies the argumentative thread of this dissertation.

II.II.I MEDITATION RESEARCH

In the last forty years, meditation has become an important field of academic research. Early attempts to study meditation involved heroic efforts, illustrated by Richard Alpert's trip to India, in 1967, to find mental maps that would enable him (a researcher in psychology at Harvard) to label altered states of consciousness, prompted by psychedelics such as LSD and psilocybin. He eventually met his teacher, Neemkaroli Baba, changed his name to Ram Dass and stopped being an academic, becoming a figure of popular culture like his former colleague, Timothy Leary (Dass, 1996).

Other academics have developed meditation research, mostly contributing towards the phenomenological exploration of nonordinary states of consciousness – basically all those states that are not restricted by the disciplined, organized and supposedly efficient mode of existence that characterizes modern life. Classic psychological research on meditation

included the analysis of the phenomenological differences between various meditative paths (Goleman, 1996; Brown, 1986), the “effects” of meditation according to different stages of practice (Walsh, 1977 and 1978; Brown and Engler, 1986), therapeutic applications of meditation (Smith, 1976; Shapiro and Giber, 1978; Kwee, 1990; Kabat-Zinn, 1991) or even complications associated with meditative practice (Walsh and Roche, 1979; Epstein and Lieff, 1981; Wilber, 1986; Kuijpers et al., 2007). Early studies on meditation, psychedelics and other contemplative practices led to the formation of transpersonal psychology, dedicated to the study of those realms of consciousness “far beyond the usual boundaries of both our bodies and our egos, as well as beyond the physical limits of our everyday lives.” (Grof and Bennet, 1993: 84)¹⁵

Meditation research is now part of mainstream academic culture – those who study consciousness, human emotions and the brain take this practice seriously. The formation of the Mind and Life Institute (MLI)¹⁶ has fostered dialogues between the Dalai Lama and researchers from all walks of academia. Psychologists, philosophers of mind, neuroscientists, cognitive scientists and phenomenologists no longer ignore meditation. Nowadays there are two popular branches of research: studies on “mindfulness” and on the couplings between meditation and the brain.

Academic research on mindfulness was highly influenced by the efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who defines this practice as consisting of “moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to.” (Kabat-Zinn, 1991: 2). Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Therapy was initially developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center as an attempt to provide increased health and well-being to people who suffered from a variety of conditions such as headaches, high blood pressure, back pain, heart disease, cancer and AIDS

¹⁵ According to Walsh and Vaughan, “Transpersonal psychology is the psychological study of transpersonal experiences and their correlates. These correlates include the nature, varieties, causes, and effects of transpersonal experiences and development, as the psychologies, philosophies, disciplines, arts, cultures, lifestyles, reactions, and religions that are inspired by them, or that seek to induce, express, apply, or understand them.” (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993: 3-4)

¹⁶ <http://www.mindandlife.org/>

(Kabat-Zinn, 1991: 1). There is a growing body of academic literature on mindfulness, evidencing a range of “positive” effects. Davis and Hayes, after a careful literature review on the topic, suggest a series of “positivities” such as self-control, objectivity, affect tolerance, enhanced flexibility, equanimity, improved concentration and mental clarity, emotional intelligence or the ability to relate to other’s and to one’s self with kindness, acceptance and compassion (Davis and Hayes, 2011: 198).

Most neuroscientific studies on meditation have suggested that meditation has real and measurable impacts on the human brain and its functions, including significant emotional changes that are measured through devices such as fMRI’s or electroencephalograms (Davidson et al., 2003; Lazar et al., 2000; Lutz et al., 2004 and 2008). Overall, meditation is no longer an obscure topic, and its effects are widely known and published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Shapiro, Walsh and Britton, in an overview of recent meditation research, suggested that “meditation appears to have the potential to enhance physiological, psychological and transpersonal well being on a wide variety of measures.” (Shapiro et al., 2003:82). They argue, however, that there are methodological problems with meditation studies that should be addressed, suggesting a set of recommendations, such as the differentiation between types of meditation, the assessment of temporal effects, the conduction of follow-up processes, the need to include experienced meditators in these studies and a stronger interplay between quantitative and qualitative data (Shapiro et al., 2003: 84-85)¹⁷.

Most of these studies focus on phenomenological aspects, neural correlates of meditative practice and the psychological effects of meditation, with strong links to chapters V and VI. However, they do not explain how new subjects and experiences emerge through different webs of associations (including training and spatial, performative and material reconfigurations) and usually these studies do not elaborate on the correlations between meditation practice and the wider social world. Some of these issues have been tackled by sociological and anthropological research on meditation.

¹⁷ For an earlier, although thorough assessment of meditation research, see Walsh (1979).

II.II.II SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MEDITATION

Sociological and anthropological literature on meditation is highly relevant for this dissertation, since there are commonalities regarding methodologies and theoretical concerns. My study explores the mobilization of devices to re-invent selfhood, as well as the politics of Zen and Vipassana versions of subjectivity. Meditation research in social sciences has focused on the importance of training, the interplay between practice, states of consciousness, emotions and daily life and on the relationship between meditation and social movements. On the following pages I will go through some of the most relevant studies in detail, justifying their importance to my research.

David Preston (1988), a sociologist, conducted a study on two Zen communities in Southern California. Informed by ethnography, interviews with practitioners, his own experience following years of Zen practice and a vast literature review (including transpersonal psychology), Preston argues that the experiences allowed by meditation shouldn't be reduced to mere situated or "local knowledge". They constitute a form of phenomenological reduction that transcends normal reality construction (Preston, 1988: 10). In fact, Preston argues that meditation involves "deconditioning of both personal and socially shared habits and processes of reality construction" (Preston, 1988: 73) – the "aim" is not the embodiment of a new symbolic universe and role but the transformation of the self through the examination of body and mind (Preston, 1988: 73). This transformation of the self is linked to the Buddhist concept of true self (Preston, 1988: 135), and Preston rejects social theory's rationalist view of humans, advocating a transpersonal model that "suggests possibilities for developing and understanding our lives together that go well beyond the assumptions and perspectives presently dominating social theory" (Preston, 1988: 146). Preston's contribution aims to overcome the common theoretical framework of those who study new religious movements, usually relying on the

notion of “conversion”, implying a transformation (or re-conversion) of the symbolic order of the self. According to the author, one should not understand the phenomenon of becoming a Zen meditator as a form of conversion but rather as a form of experiential learning, involving individual variation and effort. In chapter VII, I examine the role of meditation in daily life and also reject the conversion paradigm to analyze the embodiment of meditation practices, favouring a technological understanding of such phenomenon.

Preston follows Becker’s remarks on becoming a Marijuana smoker (Becker, 1953, see chapter VI), considering that both processes are identical (Preston, 1981:48). He argues that Zen practitioners go through important stages in order to “become” meditators: they have to sit properly to produce the symptoms of meditation; they have to recognize the symptoms as a product of sitting and they have to attribute them a certain meaning, in order to take encouragement from them (Preston, 1981: 50). In chapter VI I analyze some of the experiences Zen and Vipassana meditators go through, and I suggest that, although training is essential, we should be careful about translating Becker’s remarks on marijuana to meditation, in the sense that one should be able to learn skilful ways to detach oneself from whatever happens – including thoughts, emotions, events and sensations – to maintain the meditative way of being, and this is particularly clear with Vipassana, since one should be detached from sensuous experience¹⁸.

Michal Pagis, a sociologist, conducted an extensive ethnography in the US and Israel, interviewing numerous subjects who practice Vipassana meditation in the tradition of S. N. Goenka’s. She benefited from good access to this organization (even being allowed to record student-teacher interactions) that, as we will see in chapter III, can be quite secretive. She wrote a rich and comprehensive ethnography that revolves around three main arguments: the first one is that practices of self-cultivation can “produce” a self-dependent self, in the sense that “one’s own inner sphere is less dependent on external anchors in terms of self-knowledge, reflexivity or happiness” (Pagis, 2008: 3); secondly, self-cultivation requires a comprehensive process of training, maintenance and

¹⁸ My informants also told me that smoking Marijuana harmed their meditation practice, see chapter VII.

habituation, confirming Preston's findings; finally, Pagis argues that this mode of cultivation transforms meaning at the level of embodied semiotic processes, not only at the level of abstract and symbolic cognition (Pagis, 2008:3-4). An important point made by Pagis, linked to her third argument, is that Vipassana enacts a process of embodied self-reflexivity, supported by the augmentation of body awareness:

“The framework of embodied self-reflexivity balances the common view that gives language the main role in inner self-relations. Such a framework suggests that we can use the body consciously and reflexively just as we can use communication and language.” (Pagis, 2009: 281).

Pagis' study is, so far, the most comprehensive ethnography available on Goenka's Vipassana, showing that the continuous practice of meditation can lead to a new kind of embodied self that is able to attain reflexivity beyond language and the internal dialogue¹⁹. Her research also shows how selves are transformed through the continuous practice of meditation and how Vipassana is applied in daily life, and she suggests that retreats suspend habitual mechanisms of self-stabilization, such as the usual social environment, discursive self-narration, bodily images and affect (Pagis, 2008: 250-251), highlighting the role of *relationality* in producing new selves. Building on her valuable insights, I will focus my attention not exclusively on human actors (the meditators) but also on techniques, spaces, performances and materials, also dialoguing with meditation research (something she has not done comprehensively) and exploring wider ramifications of meditation, including its mobilization to tackle “social issues”. I also disagree with Pagis when she states that Foucault was cynical regarding the freedoms arising along with technologies of the self (Pagis, 2008: 262)²⁰; not only Foucault can help us

¹⁹ According to Mead, the “essence” of the self is cognitive, and “it lies in the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought and reflection proceeds” (Mead, 1934: 173). Pagis, through her study on Vipassana, showed us that selves do not have to be defined by cognition or the internal dialogue, meditation can help them become embodied.

²⁰ Pagis comments on the cynicism of Michel Foucault are perhaps linked to what Latour calls the “transatlantic destiny of Michel Foucault” (Latour, 2005: 86). According to Latour, “No one was more precise in his analytical

understand these emerging subjectivities as linked to new strategic reconfigurations, but we should also reflect on the types of “freedoms”, affordances (Akrich and Latour, 1992) that meditation can trigger, beyond embodiment or self-mastery in everyday life (Pagis’ focus), as it will be clear in chapters VI and VII.

A more recent study on Vipassana was conducted by Nasima Selim (2011), an anthropologist. It is an ethnographic research of the Vipassana community in Amsterdam, affiliated to the organization of S. N. Goenka. Selim undertook a six-week period of fieldwork, including observation during weekly Vipassana group sittings, semi-structured interviews with meditators, the analysis of some Vipassana-related material and a brief reflection on her personal experience. Her academic framework is the anthropology of the body and of body practices, and she explores everyday practices, lived experiences and how the effects of Vipassana are felt (Selim, 2011: 26). She follows a constructivist approach, recruiting participants’ narratives to justify the claim that Vipassana reconstructs the body and the mind, a general and relatively abstract way of saying that meditation has real effects on those who practice it. According to Selim – meditation “is mobilized to deconstruct the notion of a former ‘self’ into the reconfiguration of personhood, a ‘new’ self” (Selim, 2011: 83). Although some of the work of Ian Hacking and Annemarie Mol on ontologies is used, her approach is mostly constructivist and humanist, and the normative claims of Mol on ontological politics are not explored. Although she examines the effects of Vipassana practice, how Vipassana becomes part of the lives of the meditators, the [ontological] political dimensions of this practice of meditation are left unexplored.

Aspasia Leledaki, on the other hand, has elaborated on the normative dimensions of long-term meditation practice following her qualitative study of yoga and meditation. In her PhD dissertation, “Inner and Outer Journeys: A Qualitative Life History of Modern Yoga and Meditation as Body-Self-

decomposition of the tiny ingredients from which power is made and no one was more critical of social explanations. And yet, as soon as Foucault was translated, he was immediately turned into the one who had ‘revealed’ power relations *behind* every innocuous activity: madness, natural history, sex, administration, etc.” (Latour, 2005: 86)

Transforming Pedagogies” (Leledaki, 2007), she examines 10 life-stories of subjects who have engaged with different forms of Yoga and Meditation, drawing upon semi-structured interviews. She focuses on narratives of self-transformation, identifying fourteen key metaphors emerging from her informants’ accounts²¹. In chapter VII, I elaborate on three aspects that challenge dualist understandings of selfhood.

According to Leledaki, the 10 life-stories she studied suggest that the meditators’ *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) is transformed, and “through these pedagogies, the informants’ existential feelings might be gradually transformed and thus their body-selves potentially moving from a restrictive emotional habitus towards a more productive one.” (Leledaki, 2007: 355). Subjects move towards a kinaesthetic sense of their body-self, understood as impermanent natural elements, as a microcosm or even part of something bigger (Leledaki, 2007:355), which is ultimately a reflection of Hinduism and Buddhism. The major problem with Leledaki’s research is the fact that she focuses on life-stories of subjects who engage in different “eastern” technologies of the self, including many different types of meditation and Yoga. This neglects relevant theoretical and phenomenological differences between those practices, eventually reproducing the same Orientalism²² that she and Brown criticize: “Orientalism remains an important backdrop to the collective social meaning of Eastern movement forms in the West today” (Brown and Leledaki, 2010: 128). I suggest that, in fact, there are relevant differences between Vipassana and Zen formations – meditation is not a homogeneous practice, and this dissertation will elaborate on distinct forms of creating meditators (Chapters IV and V), of experiencing and deploying meditation in daily life (Chapters VI and VII) and of re-inventing the social (VIII).

²¹ The metaphors identified by Leledaki are the following: life as a journey and transformation as a journey within the journey of life; coming back home as the core; moving forward and moving on; awakening from the dream of everyday reality to the underlying reality; uncovering the underlying reality; seeing clearly and looking inside; recognizing the Self; Transformation of the body; From (the embodied prison of) attachment to liberation; Freedom from samsara and karma; The body is a container of Karma. (Leledaki, 2007: 194)

²² According to Said, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”” (Said, 1978: 2).

Preston, Pagis, Selim and Leledaki have conducted qualitative studies on meditation with different degrees of sophistication, research questions and theoretical backgrounds. Albeit their differences, they have one thing in common – the fact that they have ignored the broader social impacts of meditation, limiting the outcomes of these practices to daily life interactions. On the other hand, the two studies I will shortly introduce focused on the social and political dimensions of meditation in Thailand and Burma.

Joanna Cook (2010), an anthropologist, conducted an ethnographic study in a Vipassana (Non-Goenka) meditation monastery in Thailand, focusing on the process of renunciation. Her methodology relied on socialization (including becoming a nun, or *mae chee*, for a good period of time) and various interviews. By “going native”, she was able to have access to interesting data, gaining the trust of other nuns. Her findings run across various aspects, such as the experiences of monastics; the particularities of ascetic discipline; the community-monastery interactions (including a detailed analysis of the role of *dana*, or gifts) and the historical development of Buddhist monasticism in Thailand (Cook, 2010:1). Since these *mae chee* are lay women, they have an unclear role in the religious hierarchy of Thailand, leading Cook to argue that “not only asceticism [is] a vibrant and relevant practice in modernity but also that ascetic practice may be adopted by those outside the religious order valorised in textual Buddhism.” (Cook, 2010:194). Her study combines a variety of data, including interesting institutional, phenomenological and experiential aspects. However, no strong reflection is provided on the role of meditation as a technology to reorganize social relations.

Ingrid Jordt, also an anthropologist, managed to couple phenomenological and ontological aspects with social change. Her study consists of an ethnography of more than ten years in Burma (now Myanmar). Jordt studied the lay meditation movement of Mahasi Sayadaw, the most influential disseminator of Vipassana in that country – she does not focus exclusively on meditation practice, offering highly relevant insights to understand political and social aspects of meditation, with strong links to chapter VIII, where I partially draw upon her findings to analyze the entanglements between Vipassana, Zen and social change.

Her ethnography explores five different aspects: the shaping of social and political realities through meditative practices; the characteristics of the mass lay meditation movement; the codification of individual experiences operated by such movement; the sustenance of social, political and soteriological aspects through meditation; the scope and influence of political legitimacy by Buddhist laity and lay institutions through moral appeals (Jordt, 2007: 3). Jordt's study highlights the connections between meditative practice, phenomenology and social change, suggesting that "the meditation movement has promoted a Burmese Buddhist theory for the social contract between state and society" (Jordt, 2007: 92). According to Jordt, those who practice meditation are not only working towards their "salvation" but also "enacting broader social ideas about the arrangement of the state, the structure of cosmic time, and their participation in a metahistorical project of sasana perpetuation" (Jordt, 2007: 92).

How will my approach differ regarding the previously mentioned studies? Firstly, influenced by Foucault and STS, I will conduct a post-humanist research of meditation, focusing on performances, materialities and spaces. Secondly, I will explore meditation as a form of ontological politics – I will tackle meditative practices and forms of subject-formation not merely as processes of training (as in the cases of Preston and Pagis) but as forms of unveiling experiential and phenomenal realms that are blocked by modern, dominant forms of enacting selves. Thirdly, I will not consider social applications of meditation as just another dimension of technologies of the self – their inclusion is justified as exemplifying the interplay between subjective and social apparatuses, understood from a post-humanist perspective (as it will become clear in chapter VIII).

In order to sustain this approach, the following sections will draw upon two dimensions of scholarly work: Foucauldian remarks on technologies of the self and subject formation (intertwined with a number of other approaches directly or indirectly linked to his analyses) and STS literature on relationality, performativity and ontological politics, justifying my interest in the politics of meditation.

II. III TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

II.III.I INTRODUCTION

The second major branch of scholarly work influencing this dissertation concerns Michel Foucault's remarks on technologies of the self, allowing me to study meditation as a technology, thus justifying the deployment of STS literature to analyze the complexities of such practice.

The notion of technologies of the self was developed by Foucault (1988) in order to analyze Greek and Christian practices dealing with the care of the self, including some forms of meditation. These are part of a set of hermeneutical technologies, mechanisms used by humans to understand themselves, linked to different forms of developing knowledge. He lists four types of these technologies:

“(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meaning, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” (Foucault, 1988: 18)

Foucault's formulation allows me to tackle meditation as a technology of the self, not from the point of view of religion but of practice itself. A similar formulation arose in Hadot's work on “spiritual exercises”, those “voluntary, personal practices intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self” (Hadot, 2011: 87)²³.

²³ I consider that the notion of “voluntary” is problematic (in the sense that it implies the existence of human beings with “agency” and “free will”), since some technologies of power (such as governmentality, a political technology) include

Sloterdijk, through his analysis of practices of self-shaping (including western and eastern techniques), goes even further, exploring the notion of anthropotechnics:

“The methods of mental and physical practicing by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death.” (Sloterdijk, 2013: 10)

Foucault’s and Sloterdijk’s formulations are highly relevant to this dissertation in the sense that they will allow me to study meditation not as a form of religiosity but as a practice of self-reshaping. Foucault, in his analysis of the Greek notion of *epimeleia heautou*, the principle of “take care of yourself” (Foucault, 2006:4), suggests that technologies of the self are practical – one has the responsibility to undertake a series of exercises to change, purify, transform oneself, such as “techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience, of checking representations which appear in the mind” (Foucault, 2006: 11).

Sloterdijk argues that, in order to analyze practices of the self, we should reject terms such as “religion”, “religious”, “morality”, “ethics” or “spirituality”: “What we are actually dealing with ... are variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems and sets of rules for moulding one’s inward and outward behaviour.” (Sloterdijk, 2013: 84)

So much for sociology of religion. Instead of framing meditation within the field of religion²⁴, I deploy post-humanist STS literature to explore meditation as a technology of the self. Considering that the notion of “religion” is a misunderstanding, practices of meditation (such as Zen and Vipassana) can be compared and contrasted to other regimes of self-production. These can include virtually everything – the school, mass media, mainstream ways of managing bodies and mind, conventional ways of doing politics or even western

the voluntary deployment of practices and exercises (requiring the “internalization” of power) as part of their mechanisms of population control.

²⁴ Linking it to “Buddhism”, as in Jordt (2007), McMahan (2008) or Cook (2010).

psychiatry. These contrasts will be salient throughout all the chapters of this dissertation, illustrating the alternative ontologies of meditation.

Understanding practices of meditation as anthropotechnics or technologies of the self means that these are forms of “subjectification”, “heterogeneous processes and practices by means of which human beings come to relate to themselves and others as subjects of a certain type” (Rose, 1998, 25)²⁵. As put by Butler, “Subjection²⁶ is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced” (Butler, 1997b:84). We can understand subjectification as a form of what Hacking calls “making up people” (Hacking, 2002)²⁷.

The separation of technologies of the self from the notion of “religion” allows us to de-naturalize mainstream instances of subject formation. Meditation assemblages, instead of being devices of self-transformation that contrast with a sort of societal zero-level of subjectification, rather present alternative ways of being in the world. Much could be written on dominant forms of constituting and fabricating subjects. We all have been educated, we are surrounded by technological devices such as televisions, laptops or cell phones, some of us have jobs that focus on efficiency and productivity, we share languages, physical and mental dispositions that were here, in this world, much before our existence as human beings. The powers of subjectification are everywhere, and a post-humanist account of such process would have to include virtually every science and discipline to tackle all the mechanisms of power/knowledge that make us into what we are. To say that these

²⁵ Rose’s definition of subjectification is an adaptation of Foucault’s remarks on subjection – “the way a human being turns himself into a subject” (Foucault, 1982: 778). See Foucault (1990: 26-28) for an exploration of the various mechanisms of formation of the moral subject – the ethical substance, types of subjection, forms of elaboration of the self, and moral teleology. See Verbeek (2011) for an insightful analysis of the importance of Foucault’s remarks regarding human-technology associations.

²⁶ There are various ways of formulating subjectification: sometimes we also find “subjection” or “subjectivation”.

²⁷ My use of this expression is slightly different from Hacking’s – I do not understand the “making up” of people as the creation of new human categories (the deviant, the suicidal, the ethnographer/scholar) but as a dimension of subjectification, as an effect of certain technologies that postulate what people should be, feel or experience (including technologies of the self).

mechanisms are historical, cultural, psychological, biological, physical, cosmological, sociological and linguistic falls short of illustrating the complexity of the networks that make us into what we are.

The pervasiveness of anthropotechnics is not new. According to Foucault, back in the 17th century a new type of power, as part of a governmental project of docility, emerged. He called it discipline: “it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology.” (Foucault, 1995: 215)

Disciplines aimed to create docile, useful, operable bodies and selves, constituting “a certain mode of political investment of the body, a new ‘micro-physics’ of power” (Foucault, 1995: 215). They aimed at the training, reformation, normalization and reshaping of individuals in different spaces such as schools, prisons, workshops or the army. This led Foucault to question mainstream narratives of Enlightenment and Reformation as creating a new political subject – autonomous, rational, free to choose. At the practical level, these new constitutions promoting equality and freedom were, according to Foucault, supported by the disciplinary powers, ensuring the subjectification, homogeneity and normalization of individuals.

The emergence of discipline as a device of subjectification is directly linked to the dissemination of a new technology of power that Foucault calls governmentality ²⁸ . According to Miller (1987:13), governmentality is

²⁸ Foucault provides a comprehensive definition of governmentality, considered “the ensemble constituted by the institutions, the procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and the tactics that permit the exercise that well specific form, though complex, of power, that has as the main goal the population, as the major form of knowledge, the political economy, as the essential technical instrument the devices of security ... by government, I understand the tendency ... that, in all the West, hasn’t stop to conduct ... towards the prominence of this type of power that we could call the government over all the others: sovereignty, discipline; that has brought, on the one hand, the development of a whole series of specific apparatuses of government and, on the other hand, the development of a whole series of knowledge. Finally, by government, I believe that we should understand the processes or ... the result of the processes through which the State of justice of the Middle Ages, that

characterized by two important aspects: the first one concerns the management of individuals, including their conduct and aspirations (discipline) – power penetrates the life of individuals; the second vector comprises the management of the population, the flock as a whole, through the “calculated management of life” (Miller: 1987:13). Through the use of statistics, the population becomes marked by a set of regularities that can be controlled and worked upon, such as the number of deaths, diseases or accidents.

One could argue that Foucault’s focus on institutional discipline fails to recognize that, in the contemporary neo-liberal age, power is actively internalized by subjects (Rose, 2007), who are expected to actively engage in a variety of actions to normalize and enhance themselves. In contemporary societies of control, power is no longer enacted through various disciplinary instances of enclosure but through ubiquitous metastases of the same system - “In societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.” (Deleuze, 1992: 5)

The practices of meditation that I will analyze are also attempts to create different kinds of humans, but it would not be correct to reduce them to forms of discipline or governmentality. As technologies of the self, they allow selves to enter new realms of experience, to alter habitual ways of being and to eventually suspend dualist paradigms of selfhood. These incursions into governmentality served to illustrate how discipline relies on forms of subjectification; however, these technologies, such as discipline, were mobilized to hold societies together, categorizing and normalizing selves, while the practice of meditation is a “voluntary” attempt to transform oneself. These differences are linked to the distinction between technologies of power and of the self (Foucault, 1988); despite these contrasts, Foucault’s reflections on selves allow us to analyze assemblages of subjectification such as meditation

became an Administrative state at the XV and XVI centuries, has become little by little «governmentalized».” (Foucault, 1978:655)

and to explore a number of relevant issues, including performances, materiality, spaces and power.

II.III.II PERFORMANCES

Practices of meditation require individuals to engage in particular ways of managing and dealing with their bodies and minds, comprising a set of techniques that will be presented in chapter V. The exercises analyzed by Foucault included meditation, ablutions, the preparation of diaries, diets, etc.. In order to be modified, humans have to embody new sets of performances. As a technology of power, discipline is supported by a new political anatomy of the body, managed by temporally controlling its activity (what Foucault calls anatomo-chronological schemes of behaviour), including movements, gestures, and instrumentally coding the body (Foucault, 1995: 157).

More importantly, the meditative transformation of performance clashes with regular, mainstream techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973). Mauss suggested that cultural and social collectives have different ways of performing the body, drawing on a variety of performances such as sleeping, waking, walking, running, dancing, jumping, climbing, pushing, pulling, lifting, taking care of the body, consumption and reproduction (Mauss, 1973: 80-84). Zen and Vipassana anthropotechnics display some differences: in the case of Vipassana, self-transformation is operated through the performance of the immobile sitting body, whereas with Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen virtually all the techniques of the body that Mauss wrote about are mobilized to strengthen the desired mode of existence.

We can also think about this performative transformation as a shift in terms of *habitus*. This notion was popularized by Bourdieu, who suggested that *habitus* functions as a set of disposition that support human existence, granting consensus to the practices, harmonizing the experience of reality and regulating

inter-subjectivity (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Habitus reproduces human characteristics and is internalized by imitating actions and postures of others, reproducing subjective experience. Performances, in that sense, are linked to mechanisms of “reproduction”, since children imitate gestures and postures of adults, including “a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and ... a certain subjective experience” (Bourdieu, 1977: 87). In this sense, the formation of bodies is deeply interwoven with the set of practices that constitute them, which means that performances are performative. According to Butler:

“Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or the identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality”. (Butler, 1990: 185)

Butler suggests that gendered selves are performatively constituted through performances, repetitions and rituals. However, she draws upon the Althusserian (Althusser, 2008) notion of interpellation to suggest that the process of subjectification is initiated by the doctor’s verbal announcement of gender at birth: “The doctor who receives the child and pronounces: “It’s a girl” begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girlled: gender is ritualistically repeated” (Butler, 1997a: 49).

Following a post-humanist STS approach that draws upon the performative idiom (Pickering, 1995), my analysis will not be limited to these forms of discursive subjectification, but will explore material, performative and spatial ones²⁹ - following Pagis (2008), we could say that meditation is an embodied practice, instead of reducing selves to cognition, language or the internal dialogue. Moreover, some of the retreats I will analyze take place in silence, which reduces the role of verbal interpellations, in some cases leading

²⁹ However, meditation does not totally reject language - as we will see in chapter V, performances can be accompanied by small poems, or gathas, that support meditative ways of being.

to instances of “inner silence” where the wandering mind (constantly creating new thoughts and ideas) stops (see chapter VI)³⁰. However, this does not mean that performances are merely material; they are indeed entangled with particular ways of moving one’s attention towards body parts and of understanding oneself, revealing particular gazes (see chapter V).

Performances ultimately reflect technologies of power that attempt to bring forth new versions of people. In order to do so, the performative order of the individual needs to be transformed, inviting her to adopt a new set of anthropotechnics linked to different versions of subjectivity. These performative transformations are supported by material and spatial changes, carefully managed in retreat spaces, highlighting the role of material and spatial dimensions as subjectification devices.

II.III.III MATERIALS AND SPACES

Foucault’s reflections on technologies of power, such as discipline, analyzed the role of materials and spaces in the constitution of new versions of people. A good example is the Panopticon (Foucault, 1995). This architectural apparatus allows the supervisor to constantly observe prison inmates without being seen; the individuals are confined, meaning that they cannot contact with their companions, avoiding plots, violence, noise, etc.. Surveillance takes place permanently, and it does not matter who is exercising this type of power – power relations are ensured by material and architectural devices and not exclusively by experts. As Foucault suggests: “Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants.” (Foucault, 1995: 202). Latour, in his famous essay “The Berlin Key”, argues that “The very notion of discipline is impracticable without steel, without the wood of the door, without the bolt of the locks” (Latour, 1991b: 19). This means that we cannot understand instances of meditative subjectification without paying attention to couplings between

³⁰ See Cook (2010) for an interesting reflection on how advanced meditators no longer identify with a particular gender.

humans and nonhumans, and in chapter IV these entanglements will be explored.

The classic trope that illustrates the role played by nonhumans in shaping selves is Haraway's cyborg: "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (Haraway, 1991: 150). The role of materials and places in shaping subjectivity is illustrated by the consumption of drugs, leading to altered states of consciousness (Huxley, 1963; Harner, 1980), interactions between humans and machines (Schull, 2005; Brenninkmeijer, 2010) or the exposure to particular environments (Lilly, 1977; Salter, 2010). Rose (2007), in his analysis of contemporary biopolitics, suggests that this technology of power relies on entanglements between humans and nonhumans: humans are shaped by different forms of expertise (biological, psychological, psychiatric and neurological) and selves are worked upon at the biological, molecular and neurological levels.

Apart from Foucault's Panopticon, widely used in disciplinary settings (such as prisons), there are two interesting historical illustrations of how new material and spatial devices reshape subjectivities. The first example concerns Schivelbusch's reflections on the railway journey (Schivelbusch, 1977). According to him, the proliferation of railways allowed new forms of experiencing the landscape to emerge, generating the "panoramic view". Travelling by train disrupted traditional ways of experiencing journeys, initially generating criticism and resistance. The train was compared to a projectile, and its speed wouldn't allow subjects to be visually aware of the outside world, compromising perception and causing a mechanization of experience (Schivelbusch, 1977: 55).

However, the train also allowed new and enriching possibilities of dealing with the landscape, enacting the previously mentioned panoramic view:

"While the consciousness moulded by traditional travel found itself in a mounting crisis, another kind of perception started to develop, one which did not try to fight the effects of new technology of travel but, on the contrary, assimilated them entirely. For such a pair of eyes staring out of the compartment window, all the things that the old consciousness

experienced as losses became sources of enrichment. The velocity and linearity with which the train traversed the landscape did not destroy it – not at all; only under such conditions was it possible to fully appreciate the landscape.” (Schivelbusch, 1977: 59)

The second example concerns the gradual introduction of the fork in Norbert Elias’ outstanding “The Civilizing Process”. Elias analyzed the progressive change of human habits, the manners, mediated by human-material associations. The fork replaces the old habit of eating with one’s fingers, and the progressive transformation of manners generated a new “self”, marked by feelings of repulsion and shame. Modern man, according to Elias, has to be delicate, his drives and emotions have to be controlled and new instruments support this process – these nonhumans embody particular cultural and subjective meanings and modes of action. As Elias suggests:

“The suppression of eating by hand from one’s own plate has very little to do with the danger of illness ... the first authority in our decision between “civilized” and “uncivilized” behaviour at table is our feeling of distaste. The fork is nothing other than the embodiment of a specific standard of emotions and a specific level of revulsion. Behind the change in eating techniques between the Middle Age and modern times appears the same process that emerged in the analysis of other incarnations of this kind: a change in the structure of drives and emotions... The standard of delicacy finds expression in corresponding social prohibitions.” (Elias, 1982: 126-127).

Elias and Schivelbusch’s reflections exemplify how new versions of subjectivity emerge along with new material and spatial apparatuses. Coupled with post-humanist STS approaches to tackle socio-technical networks (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Pickering, 1995), I will suggest, in chapter IV, that retreat assemblages draw upon material and spatial reconfigurations to bring forth meditative versions of people. In that sense, particular materials (such as bells and cushions), architectural devices and regulations support the practice of meditation. The enactment of a new assemblage (the meditation “retreat”) that reconfigures regular associations is, therefore, the breeding ground for a new type of human.

II.III.IV POWER

Foucault's reflections on power are also highly relevant to this dissertation. Firstly, the technologies of power identified by Foucault (such as Biopolitics or Discipline) carry certain "scripts"³¹ of subjectification, these are mechanisms to ensure that the individual becomes normalized, according to a certain version of what humans should be – productive, efficient, disciplined, etc. (Foucault, 1995). Secondly, power is always linked to knowledge and expertise – there are the pastoral authorities legislating on sexuality (Foucault, 1987); the medical profession that is able to enact the clinical gaze, illuminating the truth of the sick subject (Foucault, 2003); the human sciences (such as psychology or criminology) that are an outcome of disciplinary devices, relying on knowledge and expertise and operating as laboratories of the soul (Foucault, 1995). Thirdly, power is not merely an effect of hierarchies – it is a decentred, post-humanist "force" – it relies on architectural devices such as the Panopticon (Foucault, 1995); biopolitical mechanisms such as statistics (Foucault, 1987); epistemological and praxiological apparatuses such as technologies of the self (Foucault, 1998 and 2006); somatic regularities according to the performative models of discipline, etc.. Fourthly, power is not about restricting, castrating or limiting – it is power that generates subjectivity, it is positive (Foucault, 1995), it multiplies and is always accompanied by resistance within the political frameworks subjectifying the individual (Foucault, 1987). This means that power is everywhere, it is decentred, emerging from every connection between entities³².

³¹ According to Akrich, "A large part of the work of innovators is that of "inscribing" this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a "script" or a "scenario." (Akrich, 1992: 208)

³² The following quotation is particularly illustrative: "The omnipresence of power: ... because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And "Power," insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement ... power is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society." (Foucault, 1987: 93). This decentred understanding of power has some connections with Deleuze and Guattari's

This post-humanist conception of power allows me to analyze practices of meditation as relying on a set of devices (performances, spatialities, materials, regulations and even discourses) to enact particular versions or projects of the self³³. Instead of understanding Zen and Vipassana formations as a form of “cult”, as in humanist literature (see Marty and Appleby, 1991; Dawson, 2003), focusing on humans and their institutions, I will analyze what takes place during retreats, how experiences are transformed and how technologies of meditation are used in daily life, exploring couplings between humans, technologies, nonhumans, constraints and spaces. The relationality implicit in this way of understanding power extends to the self, since these connections are considered the surface of emergence of what we understand as subjectivity, and the transformation of selfhood takes place through the reconfiguration of these habitual associations and technologies:

“Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its positivity, maybe the problem is not to discover a positive self or the positive foundation of the self. Maybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies.” (Foucault, 1999b: 181)

Drawing upon what Elias called the malleability of man³⁴, Zen and Vipassana require humans to submit themselves to heterogeneous apparatuses

rizhome, “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 21).

³³ My use of the term “projects of the self” is distinct from Giddens’ “reflexive projects of the self”. By project of the self, I understand the telos of certain technologies of power (such as those deployed by the Zen and Vipassana), in the sense that they aim at making up certain versions of people and the world. Giddens, on the other hand, has an historicist perspective of the self, arguing that, in post-traditional modernity, self-identity is reflexively organized. As he states, “The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance.” (Giddens, 1991: 5)

³⁴ As Elias stated, “Man is an extraordinary malleable and variable being. The changes of human attitude discussed here are examples of this malleability. It is by no means confined to what we generally distinguish as the “psychological” from the “physiological”. The “physis”, too, indissolubly linked to what we call the “psyche”, is variously molded in the course of history in accordance with the network of dependencies that extend throughout a human life. One might think,

in order to foster alternative ways of being in the world, allowing selves to experience new realms and transforming dominant understandings of human/environmental couplings, reconfiguring their selves. Zen and Vipassana draw on relationality, on the reconfiguring of associations between selves, nonhumans, performances and environments to enact novel experiential and social paradigms. This leads us to the following section, where I will discuss issues of relationality, performativity and ontological politics, supported by STS scholarly work.

II.IV STS

II.IV.I RELATIONALITY

An important aspect of Science and Technology Studies concerns the importance of relationality and associations, challenging dualist and humanist accounts that separate people and things. For instance, Callon (1986) suggests that, in order to study power, we should abandon all *a priori* distinctions between natural and social and we should also be impartial regarding all the actors involved in controversies (Callon, 1986: 196). Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) suggests that we should suspend all *a priori* asymmetries between people and things, recognizing that the “social” (the collective) consists of relationships and associations between heterogeneous entities:

“[social] is the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrolment. It is an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, *except* during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together.” (Latour, 2005: 64)

for example, of the molding of the facial muscles and thus of facial expression during a person’s lifetime, or of the formation of reading or writing centers in the brain.” (Elias, 1982: 277)

Those entities, the nonhumans that are part of webs of associations, are usually called *mediators*; instead of being passive entities that function as intermediaries serving human intentions and actions, a mediator “is an original event and creates what it translates as well as the entities between which it plays the mediating role” (Latour, 1991a: 78). In sum, *things* have agency, and in ANT “Human and nonhuman actors are ... treated as being somehow on a par with one another.” (Pickering, 1992: 20)

In terms of scientific practice, this means that the work of scientists should be understood from a performative perspective, in the sense that scientists have to struggle with nonhumans (material agency) that they attempt to capture in machines – “Scientists are human agents in a field of material agency which they struggle to capture in machines. Further, human and material agency are reciprocally and emergently intertwined in this struggle.” (Pickering, 1995: 21)

Taking into consideration Pickering’s and ANT’s insights, one can understand meditation as involving displacements and reconfigurations, new webs of associations with new agents. These new agents can be physical spaces, timetables or materials. In order to capture “material agency” (which here we can understand as particular states of consciousness or ways of being, linked to Vipassana or Mindfulness), meditators have to struggle with their habit patterns (boredom, sleepiness, pain after sitting for a long time). Practices of Meditation can be understood as mediators that unveil new ways of experiencing oneself and support new ways of acting in daily life, as well as mediating a variety of “social” applications.

A relevant dimension of relationality is that entities emerge through these couplings, they are not pre-existing beings, as suggested by Barad’s notion of intra-actions (Barad, 2007), reinforcing the volatile ontology of matter and bodies (Mol, 1999; Clough, 2007; Blackman, 2010). Donna Haraway’s remarkable exploration of companion species highlights the importance of relationality, reinforcing the role of couplings in fabricating entities that do not exist prior to these associations:

“Through their reaching into each other, through their ‘prehensions’ or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relatings. ‘Prehensions’ have consequences. The world is a knot in motion. . . . There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends.” (Haraway, 2003: 6)

Influenced by these STS remarks on relationality, how should we think about subjectivities? Gomart and Hennion (1999) wrote an interesting paper that translates these post-humanist insights into the study of the self, reflecting on passionate subjects who consume drugs or are music amateurs. According to the authors:

“Human activity is ‘made possible’, ‘potentialized’, ‘conditioned’ by the activity of drugs or the pull of music. The *conditioning* of the amateur by cocaine or Bach’s partitas requires that she meticulously *establish conditions*: active work must be done in order to be moved.” (Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 227)

These conditions or new associations that the authors mention can also be applied to meditation. Subjects have to leave their homes, sit in particular ways and follow some rules (conditions) to be *moved* by meditation. Relationality, linked to the reconfiguration of heterogenous networks, is a fundamental device for the transformation of selves that, as Hennion and Gomart suggest, emerge through entanglements with *dispositifs*³⁵. These dispositifs affect selves and, influenced by Latour’s insights on the human body,

³⁵ According to Gomart and Hennion, a dispositif “focuses on objects, conditions and means through which entities in networks emerge” (Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 244). The notion of dispositif plays a fundamental role in Foucault’s thinking. According to Agamben, it can be translated as “apparatus” (Agamben, 2009), but sometimes it is translated as device (that is the formulation I will use throughout this dissertation). The Foucauldian notion of dispositif reinforces his post-humanist understanding of power: “What I’m trying to single out with this term is, first and foremost, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus [dispositif/device] itself is the network that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3: 299, cited in Agamben, 2009: 2)

one could say that a relevant dimension of subjectivity is the development of the capacity to be *affected*:

“[the body is] *an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements*. The body is thus not a provisional residence of something superior – an immortal soul, the universal or thought – but what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of.” (Latour, 2004: 206)

Much of this dissertation is an attempt to describe the couplings that generate new ways for selves to be affected. In chapter IV (Setting), I argue that Zen and Vipassana paradigms of selfhood break habitual connections with nonhumans, spaces, regulations, establishing new ones and introducing a number of techniques that alter regular nonmeditative performances (chapter V). These new relations initially generate resistance, but can eventually bring forth experiences that are made possible (as put by Gomart and Hennion) by new mediations. These entanglements are linked to another concern that runs through this dissertation, a concern with the politics of ontology. If these modes of subjectivity emerge along with new associations, relationships and couplings, what are the politics of these versions of people, and how do these reconfigurations contribute to enact particular paradigms of selfhood?

II.IV.II ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND PERFORMATIVITY

As we have seen in the Introduction, a number of concepts have emerged in STS that condense the interplay between practices and ontology, and a special issue of “Social Studies of Science”, in June 2013, was called “A Turn to Ontology in Science and Technology Studies?”, with a number of articles authored by academics including Steve Woolgar, John Law, Annemarie Mol and Michael Lynch (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013; Law and Lien, 2013; Mol, 2013; Lynch, 2013).

Ontology addresses the problems of “how things are, what is a person, and what sort of a world this is” (Bateson, 1972: 313)³⁶. Since meditation is a form of intervention, enacting particular paradigms of subjectivity, it raises a set of issues dealing with the articulations between performances and ontology and the kinds of selves and worlds it makes possible. The term “ontological politics” was coined by Annemarie Mol to exemplify how different medical practices perform distinct versions of bodies:

“*Ontological politics* is a composite term. It talks of *ontology* – which in standard philosophical parlance defines what belongs to the real, the conditions of possibility we live with. If the term ‘ontology’ is combined with that of ‘politics’ then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term *politics* works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested.” (Mol, 1999: 74-5)

Mol (2002) explores this notion in regards to two medical conditions, anaemia and atherosclerosis, suggesting that “reality is manipulated by means of various tools in the course of a diversity of practices” (Mol, 1999: 77). Different medical practices (clinical practice; statistics or pathophysiology), though, are not closed upon themselves. They coexist and are put in *sequence*, reinforcing the idea of multiplicity between alternative realities that do not only coexist but “are also found inside one another” (Mol, 1999: 85). Mol’s remarks highlight the political dimension of *relationality* - what kind of devices should be used and who should have the legitimacy to select them?

Along similar lines, John Law reflects on the implications for the social sciences of a new vision of method. The productive function of method attributes to social sciences a political dimension, associated with the impossibility of neutrality:

³⁶ According to Bateson, the traditional distinction between ontology (what things are) and epistemology (how we know things) is artificial, in the sense that “beliefs about what sort of world it is will determine how he sees it and acts within it, and his ways of perceiving and acting will determine his beliefs about its nature” (Bateson, 1972: 313).

“Method assemblage and its products can also be judged politically. It does politics, and it is not innocent. In its different versions it operates to make certain (political) arrangements more probable, stronger, more real, whilst eroding others and making them less real.” (Law, 2004: 149)

In the ontology of multiplicity, method becomes performative, helping to produce certain realities and “The issue becomes how to make things different, and what to make.” (Law, 2004: 143)³⁷

Michel Callon explored the notion of performativity linked to the creation of economic markets. A simple way to define performativity would be to say that it is related to the joint process commanded by specialists and the materiality of the field that they “describe”. Laws, regularities and trends emerge as a result of performances by different actors³⁸, in line with the post-humanist critique of representation (see, for instance, Pickering, 1995). Callon’s claim is that “both the natural and life sciences, along with the social sciences, contribute towards enacting the realities that they describe” (Callon, 2006: 7). Economics and the economy co-constitute themselves, since the discipline contributes to the framing of economic institutions, such as markets: the laws of the markets are not in the nature of society or humans, nor are they constructed to simplify a complex reality. Those laws are linked to regularities established through actions, including those of economists (Callon, 1998: 46-47).

³⁷ These reflections on method, from the perspective of ontological politics, are particularly interesting because this dissertation deals with meditative exercises, procedures for self-transformation, methods of the self. Although Thich Nhat Hanh prescribes a set of practices of mindfulness, in Vipassana meditation there is a constant focus on the “purity of the technique”, the fact that the technology of Vipassana, as it is taught by S. N. Goenka, is something that has been transmitted, in its pristine form, since the time of the Buddha. In that sense, the “method” of Vipassana links the technical with the spiritual – in order to achieve certain results, one has to follow the right method of meditation, avoiding other techniques, as we will see in chapters III and V.

³⁸ Callon’s research has strong implications for social scientists. These are no longer limited to the formulation of general rules or providing accounts on the functioning of “societies”. Their job should be the multiplication of possible realities – “We no longer have to choose between interpreting the world and transforming it. Our work, together with the actors, is to multiply possible worlds through collective experimentations and performances.” (Callon, 2006: 53)

Similar concerns with practice and ontology have emerged much earlier, including Fleck's remarks on the Wasserman reaction (Fleck, 1979) or Marx's aphorism stating that "production not only creates an object for the subject but also a subject for the object" (cited in Pickering, 2005: 31). These various examples reinforce the political dimension of scientific and technological practice, being translated into various recommendations or programs - Mol advocates a more active engagement of patients in the selection of the treatments they are submitted to; Callon argues for the deployment of hybrid forums of public participation (aiming to overcome the so-called "double delegation" of contemporary technical democracies, see Callon et al., 2001) and Pickering, through the notion of performative incommensurability, questions conventional, modern forms of human agency, supported by what he calls nonstandard human performances (Pickering, 1995).

As stated in the Introduction, one of my hypotheses is that Zen and Vipassana practices constitute politics of ontology, enacting nonmodern kinds of selfhood, a notion that is inspired by Pickering's reflections on cybernetics and is linked to Latour's exploration of modernity. According to Latour, modern and nonmodern are terms that illustrate different understandings of the couplings between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture. Moderns tend to be dualists, separating these two dimensions, while "a nonmodern is anyone who takes simultaneously into account the moderns' Constitution and the populations of hybrids that that Constitution rejects and allows to proliferate." (Latour, 1991a:47). Latour's use of the notion is mostly political, and he wishes to overcome the modern dualism between nature and culture by developing a new kind of parliament – the parliament of things (see chapter VIII). Pickering's use of the term is slightly different - it is linked to the ontological politics of cybernetics, and the notion of nonmodern is used to distinguish cybernetic applications from mainstream, modern ones, such as conventional psychiatry:

"Conventional psychiatry, one could say, already knows what people should be like, and it is the telos of this sort of psychiatry to reengineer—to enframe—mental patients back into that image. That is why a hierarchical system of social relations is appropriate. Power relations and understandings of the self go together. The Bateson-Laing line, of course, was that selves are endlessly complex and endlessly explorable, and the antihierarchical approach of Kingsley Hall was deliberately

intended to facilitate such exploration in both the mad and the sane. This is the mode of revealing, of finding out what the world has to offer us. We can, then, name this contrast in social relations in terms of power and hierarchy, but that is not enough. The sociological contrast echoed and elaborated a contrast in ontological stances—enframing versus revealing— which is, I think, very hard to grasp from the standpoint of modernity.” (Pickering, 2010: 211)

Meditation can suspend the modern self, characterized in the introduction as a dual centre of reason and control. The set of experiences and possibilities generated by meditation can be understood as an alternative to modern understandings of subjectivity, such as the skin-encapsulated ego (Watts, 1966) or Elias’ *homo clausus* (1978)³⁹. The exploration of the politics of meditation will be clearer in chapters VI, VII and VIII, where I will analyze the range of experiences allowed by meditation, the transformation of subjectivity in everyday life and the couplings between technologies of meditation and the “social”, encompassing different understandings of human reformation, social activism or environmentalism.

These remarks on relationality, performativity and ontological politics contribute to strengthen the interpretative thread of this dissertation that I will clarify in the following section.

II.V INTERPRETATION

This section lays out the interpretative thread of the dissertation and clarifies a number of relevant concepts to my analysis. I will explore a variety of issues, including how we should think about selves; how to interpret the forms of subjectification operated by meditation; how to tackle the new experiences and ways of being that meditation supports as well as the politics of meditation.

³⁹ Elias’ characterization of the *homo clausus* is particularly insightful in order to describe the modern self: “The conception of the individual as *homo clausus*, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside, determines the image of man in general. Every other human being is likewise seen as *homo clausus*; his core, his being, his true self appears likewise as something divided within him by an invisible wall from everything outside, including every other human being. (Elias, 1978: 249)

I suggest that selves should be understood as comprising a set of automatisms; that meditation assemblages transform these automatisms through the establishment of new webs of associations and technologies of the self; that meditation fosters the installation of new automatisms and leads to the development of novel experiences; finally, I argue that the automatisms, experiences and social applications supported by meditation practice are nonmodern, contrasting with their modern, dual counterparts.

A key feature of meditation as a technology of the self is to challenge existing automatisms, installing new ones. The notion of automatism was characterized by Hartmann in the following way:

“In well-established achievements they [preconscious ego processes] function automatically: the integration of the somatic systems involved in the action is automatized, and so is the integration of the individual mental acts involved in it. With increasing exercise of the action its intermediate steps disappear from consciousness. ... Not only motor behaviour, but perception and thinking, too, show *automatization*. Exercise automatizes methods of problem-solving just as much as it does walking, speaking or writing. ... In using automatisms we apply means which already exist, which we need not create anew at every occasion, and consequently the means-end relations in some areas are, so to speak, “not subject to argument”. (Hartmann, 1958:88-91)⁴⁰

To get on with our daily lives, we resort to a series of automatisms that we have learned - walking, eating, seeing, breathing. As we have seen previously, Bourdieu and Mauss use notions such as habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) or techniques of the body (Mauss, 1973) to talk about these things. When a new baby is born, he is expected to start breathing automatically – in fact, crying out loud means that the infant is fully able to use his or her lungs and to breathe regularly, meaning that the automatism is put in place and the child is healthy. Breathing usually takes place without our conscious control - when our bodies lose the ability to breathe automatically we need the help of devices such as iron lungs or ventilators. Being able to eat, walk and breathe without thinking too much about it is a relevant dimension of being human, and these automatisms

⁴⁰ According to Mead, automatisms are “certain inevitable reactions to certain specific stimuli, such as taking our hand away from a radiator that is touched, or jumping when a loud sound occurs behind us.” (Mead, 1934: 83). Mead’s definition focuses exclusively on the aspect of reaction; in this dissertation, not only reactions but also thoughts, perception and movements are considered automatisms that meditation, as an art of living, deals with.

are deep rooted habits that have been repeated numerous times, and most of the time we are not aware of them.

In order to operate subjective changes, meditation practices require individuals to direct their attention toward automatisms⁴¹. In Vipassana, one has to turn the attention to the breath coming in and going out; after some days of retreat, one pays attention to sensations throughout the body. Similarly, the Zen practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh require subjects to become aware of what they are doing and to transform their automatisms. They have to train themselves to stop and breathe for three times when they hear the sound of the bell; they have to walk slowly and to coordinate breath with movement; they have to eat in different ways, etc.. In sum, the forms of subjectification operated by meditation require participants to embrace a set of practices that deal with regular automatisms, installing new ones - scanning the body from head to toe, observing sensations or stopping and breathing every time one hears the sound of the bell. These technologies will be explored in detail in chapter V.

These devices of subjectification do not rely exclusively on technologies of the self. Supported by STS literature on relationality, I suggest that a relevant dimension of meditation assemblages is the transformation of habitual environments. In everyday life, much of what we do is supported by nonhumans (cars, tables, computers, chairs), spaces (living rooms, offices, highways) and a number of entities including norms, expectations and personal dispositions. These devices constitute webs of associations that are entangled with selves - subjectivities are always coupled with particular heterogeneous configurations⁴².

⁴¹ Meditation, according to Deikman (1966), is a form of de-automatization (Gill and Brenman, 1959) – the self becomes aware of automatic processes and does not identify with or reacts to them, which permits new experiences and understandings of reality to emerge, including mystical experiences. However, I suggest that what is at stake is the installation of new automatisms.

⁴² My use of the term “webs of associations” is influenced by STS scholarly work, in particular by ANT (see previous section), recognizing the role played by nonhumans in socio-technical systems. Similar approaches have been developed in psychology, such as the theory of distributed cognition. According to Hutchins, memory is distributed throughout human and nonhuman devices. He studied airplanes’ cockpits and suggested that memory is supported by nonhumans such as the “speed bugs”, transcending the boundaries of individual actors – “Memory is normally thought of as a psychological function

Foucault used the term discourses to characterize these surfaces of emergence of subjectivity⁴³. Following a post-humanist interpretation, my analysis will address material and performative aspects of subjectification - in chapter IV I develop a post-humanist analysis of retreats as settings (comprising a number of subjectification devices) that break habitual webs of associations (such as those we encounter in our daily lives), establishing new relations – with bells, cushions, timetables and a variety of constraints, including silence.

Mobilizing particular forms of awareness towards regular automatisms, installing new ones and submitting participants to different environments are the two major instances of subjectification I analyze in this dissertation (see chapters IV and V). The transformation of habitual performances and settings allows practitioners to go through experiences that contrast with dominant states of consciousness. The attempt to transform automatisms and to submit humans to new settings is met with resistance, generating struggles of agency. If selves persist and deal with these resistances they can eventually install new automatisms and tune in to different realms of experience, including feeling subtle vibrations throughout their body, experiencing dissolution or oneness with the present moment, suspending the flow of thoughts. Michael Harner used the term Ordinary States of Consciousness (OSC) to contrast everyday life,

internal to the individual. However, memory tasks in the cockpit may be accomplished by functional systems which transcend the boundaries of the individual actor. Memory processes may be distributed among human agents, or between human agents and external representational devices.” (Hutchins, 1995: 284)

⁴³ According to Foucault, discourses denote “a group of verbal performances; and by discourse, then, I meant that which was produced (perhaps all that was produced) by the groups of signs. But I also meant a group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions. Lastly — and it is this meaning that was finally used (together with the first, which served in a provisional capacity) — discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, insofar as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence.” (Foucault, 2002: 120-121). Foucault suggested that “discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined” (Foucault, 2002: 60), meaning that discourse is not something individuals can deploy but rather devices that create subject-positions; a subject, therefore, is a “vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (Foucault, 2002: 107).

mundane experience, with Shamanic States of Consciousness (SSC)⁴⁴. The emergence of distinct states of consciousness along with meditation practice follows the radical reconfiguration of settings and of how people deal with their automatisms. This generates new ways of experiencing selves and the world, and the role of chapter VI is to explore some of the experiences shared by my interviewees.

In order to tune in on meditative states of consciousness, participants have to replace habitual automatisms. They have to submit themselves to new webs of associations and technologies of the self. New states and ways of being are not enacted as a direct result of their will and intentions - they actually require meditators to be passive in order to emerge, taking them by surprise, as I suggest in chapter VI. As Pickering states:

“As active, intentional beings, scientists tentatively construct some new machine. They then adopt a passive role, monitoring the performance of the machine to see whatever capture of material agency it might effect. Symmetrically, this period of human passivity is the period in which material agency actively manifests itself.” (Pickering, 1995: 21-22)

The participants surrender themselves to new webs of associations and technologies of the self, becoming passive in face of new networks of power, suspending their will. When these new assemblages become installed, meditative agency can eventually emerge, and nonmodern experiences take place without individual control: “Captures and their properties in this sense just happen. This is my basic sense of emergence, a sense of brute chance, happening in time.” (Pickering, 1995: 24)

Practices of meditation allow meditators to capture different agencies, including mystical experiences (chapter VI), nonstandard phenomena that

⁴⁴ According to Harner, “Dragons, griffins, and other animals that would be considered "mythical" by us in the OSC are "real" in the SSC. The idea that there are "mythical" animals is a useful and valid construct in OSC life, but superfluous and irrelevant in SSC experiences. "Fantasy" can be said to be a term applied by a person in the OSC to what is experienced in the SSC. Conversely, a person in the SSC may perceive the experiences of the OSC to be illusory in SSC terms. Both are right-, as viewed from their own particular states of consciousness.” (Harner, 1980: xvi)

question mechanistic understandings of time and space or the ability to abandon their skin-encapsulated selves (chapter VII) – these are temporally emergent phenomena (Pickering, 1995) that can be eventually perceived if practitioners implement technologies of meditation.

In order to get on in the world in meditative ways, these technologies have to keep running, altering habitual ways of reacting to events and allowing the emergence of a wide range of phenomena that can include a heightened awareness towards others and even telepathy and synchronicity (chapter VII).

There are many notions that can be used to classify the fruits or effects of meditation. Foucault suggested that power is always positive – in the case of meditation, new settings and technologies of the self conjure up new ways of being in the world, and these can be understood as positivities. Akrich and Latour use the Gibsonian notion of affordances to characterize “what a device allows or forbids from the actors” (Akrich and Latour, 1992: 261)⁴⁵ – the device of meditation allows actors to experience a wide range of phenomena that regular, modern configurations prevent, experiences that people in OSC, as put by Harner, usually do not go through and do not understand - they are in a different frequency and paradigm of subjectivity. In order to capture these affordances of meditative agency, participants have to suspend their will, embracing new regulations, moving and sitting in particular ways, staying in particular places for certain periods of time – by doing so, they have a chance to witness the emergence of new ontologies that are blocked by modern configurations of selfhood.

⁴⁵ Gomart and Hennion also resort to the notion of affordances to highlight the fact that “the propensity of music refers to and unfolds with the habits and embodiment of the creature listening.” (Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 239). The notion of “affordances” was created by James Gibson, and it refers to the possibilities offered by the environment – “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.” (Gibson, 1986: 127). In this dissertation, “affordances” will not refer exclusively to the new possibilities offered by the retreat environment but also to the phenomena that emerge along with meditation practices, understood as mediators.

Meditation practices are nonmodern, contrasting with modern, dual ways of being in the world. Eating meditation involves thinking about food chains and nonhumans; the technique of Vipassana involves looking for sensations in the body, increasing one's awareness. Modern automatisms produce a dualism between mind and body, self and others, humans and nonhumans. The automatisms and experiences prompted by meditation contrast with dualist versions of selfhood and anthropocentric human/nonhuman couplings, constituting alternatives to modern forms of subjectivity. Experiencing dissolution and eating as a deeply collective endeavour are positivities allowed by the assemblages of meditation, webs of associations and automatisms that are surfaces of emergence of meditative agencies. I argue that the ontologies of meditation are nonmodern, expanding the range of human experience beyond dualism, representation and control, revealing symmetrical and performative ways of being in the world.

The experiences generated by meditation practice suggest that the way one inhabits the world is not linear but rather filtered by automatisms. Jakob von Uexkull used the notion of Umwelt, usually translated as environment, to argue that different species have different ways of experiencing the world. We pick up certain elements from the environment according to our organisms and sense organs, selecting a small amount of what is available - "Every subject spins out, like the spider's threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence" (Uexkull, 2010: 53). Different ways of perceiving the environment are linked to different physical constitutions – an example used by von Uexkull is the tick, that has a very limited and reductive experience of the world⁴⁶. One could argue that an important dimension of meditation training is to transform one's perception of the environment, including bodily dimensions and how one deals with external objects. Through the installation of new automatisms and associations, the human machine is altered, allowing the emergence of new agencies, increasing one's sensitivity to perceive them. This includes a variety of nonordinary states

⁴⁶ According to Uexkull, "The whole rich world surrounding the tick is constricted and transformed into an impoverished structure that, most importantly of all, consists only of three features and three effect marks—the tick's environment." (Uexkull, 2010: 51)

(chapter VI) different ways of perceiving the self in relation to its environment (chapter VII), leading to the enactment of an extended version of subjectivity that does not filter those nonstandard phenomena usually unavailable to nonmeditators.

The installation of new automatisms fosters the emergence of a different Umwelt, allowing meditators to undergo novel experiences and to develop sensitivity towards phenomena they would otherwise ignore. In chapter VII I use the notion of “equipment” (influenced by Foucault’s and Rabinow’s remarks on the Greek notion of *paraskeue*) to suggest that the application of technologies of the self in daily life leads to a wide range of consequences, including new ways of reacting to difficult situations and the development of a set of positivities that can be understood as nonmodern, transforming regular experience.

The nonmodern character of meditation extends to its social applications. In chapter VIII I analyze how meditation is used to tackle human reformation and the environmental crisis and to support forms of social action. One could argue that the “social” dimension is not necessarily linked to technologies of the self. However, in order to operate subjective changes, Vipassana and Zen assemblages reconfigure habitual webs of associations with nonhumans, spaces and regulations (see chapter IV) that constitute the social. The subjectifying power of new heterogeneous assemblages and the wide range of new ways of experiencing reality that they enact support new ways of imagining and performing the world, constituting mediators that affect and reconfigure the social sphere. Vipassana’s approach towards human reformation in prisons is influenced by the performativity of the self that allows individuals to transform their selfhood due to new practices and associations; meditation-based approaches to tackle the environmental crisis are supported by a symmetrical conception of human and nonhuman couplings, rejecting the modern and dualist anthropocentric bias.

Influenced by Foucauldian and STS literature, I suggest that meditation fosters subjective changes through the reconfiguration of habitual environments (the retreat) and the installation of new automatisms (stopping and breathing whenever one hears the sound of the bell; accepting whatever sensation occurs at the bodily level, without craving or aversion), allowing selves to tune in to realms of experience that are “blocked” by ordinary states of consciousness.

These new realms of experience are eminently nonmodern, prompting nondual experiences of the environment, feeling the body as dissolved or experiencing a total absorption in the present moment. These transformations are not limited to mystical experiences (chapter VI) but involve novel ways of being in the world. Progressively, practitioners are able to develop new forms of awareness, abandoning dual, skin-encapsulated ways of being, transforming habitual ways of experiencing the environment – their *Umwelt* is transformed.

The performativity of selves extends to the plasticity of the world we live in. Zen and Vipassana practices act as mediators, influencing and reconfiguring broader social formations, informed by meditative insights such as impermanence or Interbeing (see chapter V) and by different paradigms of subjectivity. The applications that they bring forth suspend habitual distinctions between friend and foe, human and nonhuman, normal and deviant. By coupling Foucauldian reflections on subjectivity with STS insights on politics and technology, this dissertation will explore the politics of meditation, examining how human subjects undergo a number of subjective changes through the development of technologies of the self and how these technologies inform alternative ways of performing social worlds, presenting meditation as the breeding ground for nonmodern paradigms of the self and the world.

II.VI CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined three branches of scholarly work highly relevant to this dissertation: meditation research; Foucauldian reflections on subjectivity and post-humanist STS concerns with relationality, performativity and ontological politics. Meditation is not understood as a religious practice but as a technology of the self that mobilizes spatial, legislative, material and performative devices to create different versions of people. These instances of subjectification, aiming at the transformation of regular automatisms, clash with the habitual networks that support the modern self – new connections have to be established to allow different experiences, different ways of acting in everyday life and of tackling social problems – affordances of meditation.

Considering these three branches of academic literature, the contribution of this dissertation is threefold. Regarding meditation research, I will develop a post-humanist analysis of meditation, focusing on how self and social transformations are fostered by different associations between meditators and new webs of associations that include new environments, nonhumans and techniques. Concerning Foucauldian reflections on subjectivity, I will move beyond Foucault's focus on the genealogy of western subjectivity. Instead of focusing on the history of subject formations, I will analyze Zen and Vipassana practices as constituting alternative paradigms to dominant social/self formations, linked to different networks of subjectivity, exploring the experiences of meditators. Finally, I will contribute towards expanding STS scholarly work on the self, analyzing meditation as a technology of the self that performs nonmodern versions of subjectivity and of the world.

The role of the following chapter is to explain how I developed my research, presenting the wide range of methods I used to study meditation and the difficulties I came across.

III. METHODOLOGY

III.I INTRODUCTION

Historically, meditation studies have drawn upon a series of methods to address a multiplicity of research questions. In psychology, different methodologies were used, including tests (such as the Rorschach test, see Brown and Engler, 1986), the personal experience of the author (Walsh, 1977 and 1978), the analysis of central texts of Buddhist meditation, such as the Visuddhimagga, providing “maps” for inner spaces (Goleman, 1996) or even quantitative methods. Sociological and anthropological studies have resorted to comprehensive ethnographies (Cook, 2010; Jordt, 2007; Pagis, 2008; Preston, 1988), semi-structured interviews with meditators (Pagis, 2008; Selim, 2011), life-stories of practitioners (Leledaki, 2007) and the personal experience of the researcher (Selim, 2011; Preston, 1988). More recently, neuroscientific and neurophenomenological studies have measured the brainwaves of experienced meditators through fMRI’s and other technological instruments, justifying the assumption that meditation has real, measurable effects on the brains (and minds) of practitioners (see, for instance, Lutz et al., 2004).

These different approaches are ways of tackling phenomena taking place at the realm of “inner experience”, which can raise a set of methodological issues: how to translate the inner world? Can we use words to talk about those experiences that belong to the realm of the ineffable? Can we trust the accounts of those who go through these states? Are academic approaches to meditation based on personal experiences “objective”?⁴⁷ As Wittgenstein states, “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” (Wittgenstein, 1961: 89); if we assume that meditation is about the ineffable, the unreachable and untranslatable, then meditation research would become an impossible endeavour. However, instead of becoming a *verboden* field of study, it requires

⁴⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of some of the issues raised by first-person approaches to the study of consciousness, see Varela and Shear (1999).

the deployment of innovative methodologies that recognize the particularities of the topic. Varela and Shear (1999) argue that links have to be created between first and third person approaches to the study of consciousness. This involves the deployment of a set of methodologies in order to “move towards an integrated or global perspective on mind where neither experience nor external mechanisms have the final word. The global perspective requires the explicit establishment of *mutual constraints*, a reciprocal influence and determination” (Varela and Shear, 1999:2). A good example of intertwining first and third person approaches is, for instance, crossing verbal reports of meditative experiences with their physiological correlates, measured in laboratories (Shear and Jevning, 1999).

Another important issue concerning meditation research is that those who undertake it become actively involved in this practice, which means that sometimes they have to “go native” in order to study ritual or religious experience (Knibbe et al., 2001). This is justified by various reasons: in order to have access to those places where meditation is taught (monasteries, practice centres, etc.), one has to practice; to understand the particularities of this technology of the self, one is required to have experiential knowledge, in order to know what meditation is all about; finally, meditation is a deeply existential and spiritual quest - it is about personal transformation, dealing with fears, expectations, sensations, memories and, of course, the possibility of transcendence – it mobilizes the totality of the individual, and requires a strong engagement to attain long lasting results. As Bache suggests, “The philosophical discussion of nonordinary states cannot be done well from a distance but requires the commitment of personal experience” (Bache, 2000: 6).

My interest in meditation is not purely academic: as a curious human being, I also want to explore the possibilities of experience beyond the shackles of modern selfhood and academia. Meditation can easily become a passion for the academic and, in this field, it is not uncommon to “go native”, becoming an avid practitioner. In fact, mind-altering practices and substances have this particularity – the stories of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (now Ram Dass) are well known – through their contact with psychedelics (such as LSD) and spiritual practices (such as meditation), they “went native”, abandoning the

establishment (namely academia, the University of Harvard) and embodying new sets of beliefs and technologies; Michael Harner, after experiencing ayahuasca, decided to dedicate his career to the promotion of shamanism, even developing new techniques for the emergence of altered states of consciousness (Harner, 1980); Stanislav Grof, after taking LSD for the first time, realized that his career as a psychiatrist was forever transformed (Grof and Bennet, 1993).

Meditation is also prone to these phenomena – Cook (2010) became a nun to conduct her study and Preston (1988) became deeply involved with the Los Angeles Zen Centre. In my case, I did not have any serious experience with meditation, although I practiced from time to time, and nowadays I try to maintain a regular meditative regime. However, I am still a beginner, therefore there are many meditative realms that I do not claim to understand, meaning that my reflections on meditation are limited by my experience. In that sense, we should probably reformulate Wittgenstein's proposition, turning it into something like: "What we cannot experience we must pass over in silence."

Finally, as stated in the literature review, methods are performative, they open up certain realities, as Law puts it (2004). This complicates my research even more: on the one hand, meditation is a difficult subject to tackle, since it apparently deals with inner experience; on the other hand, meditation research requires the deployment of certain methodologies that offer partial readings of the real – in the case of this dissertation, qualitative research methods.

In order to address these issues, I selected different methodologies to deal with specific research questions, bearing in mind the overall concerns of this dissertation – mechanisms of subjectification and the ontological politics of Vipassana and Zen. I am particularly concerned with how specific interventions and associations allow the emergence of different subjective dispositions. Therefore, I decided that this project should unfold in such a way that I would have different chapters on the articulations between subjectification and ontological transformations, drawing on aspects such as the setting, performances, experiences, meditation in everyday life and social applications of meditation.

This means that I had to obtain data on those different aspects. Regarding the setting, I needed to understand how these retreats work. What kinds of mechanisms are used? What are the materials that are recruited to “shape” subjectivities in these spaces? What are the regulations that these movements draw upon in order to perform new subjectivities? Then, since we are dealing with technologies of the self, I needed to understand exactly what the performances, techniques, movements, forms of managing the mental and somatic order of the individual employed by meditation actually are. In sum, I had to obtain data on the performative reorganization of the meditative individual. Since these movements also deploy specific politics of experience (Laing, 1967), particular ways of experiencing bodies, minds and the environment, I needed to have access to those realms of experience. According to Zahavi, “Phenomenology is concerned with attaining an understanding and proper description of the experiential structure of our mental/embodied life” (Galagher and Zahavi, 2008:9); regarding meditation, I was interested in understanding what happens when one meditates and how it differs from “normal” experience. Concerning meditation in daily life, we find in both traditions an attempt to disseminate meditative technologies (and dispositions) throughout everyday life. Therefore, this required data on how these practices are used in daily life and how they transform subjectivities. Finally, and concerning the chapter on meditation and social change, I had to understand exactly how these movements mobilize meditation to foster social transformations – what exactly are their projects? How have they historically promoted certain social arrangements and what is the role played by meditation?

These various concerns justified the use of a multifaceted methodology, including participant observation; semi-structured interviews; auto-ethnography; central literary sources concerning each movement; numerous personal accounts dealing with these practices, present in popular literature, online blogs, discussion forums or even journals (and newsletters) published by these traditions; movies and documentaries exploring social applications of meditation, particularly Vipassana. The role of the following sections is to

explain how these various resources were mobilized and to critically reflect on the methods used.

III.II PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

My fieldwork involved participation in four meditation retreats. In May 2010 I went to my first 10-day Vipassana retreat, in Dhamma Dipa, Herefordshire, England. I attended the second 10-day retreat in November 2011, in the South of Portugal, this time at a non-permanent centre⁴⁸. Regarding the case study on Zen, I attended a two-week retreat in March 2011, and I returned to Plum Village for a week of intensive practice in December 2011. In both cases, my stay coincided with the winter-retreat, a period of three months between early December and March when the whole monastic community (along with Thich Nhat Hanh) is present, since there are various monasteries worldwide where the community can travel to. The “central” monastery of this tradition, where Thich Nhat Hanh lives, is located in the South of France, one hour by train from Bordeaux, and it is called Plum Village. I also “followed” the local groups of Vipassana and Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen meditation group in Exeter. In the case of Zen, I started following the group in October 2010, and until approximately June 2011 I maintained a regular contact with the Sangha, or community of practice. Between March-May 2012 I resumed attending the weekly meetings of the group. During these periods, I also managed to attend 3 “mindfulness days”, basically a day (usually on Sundays) dedicated to intensive practice, including sitting, eating and walking meditation, dharma sharing, etc. (see chapter V). I participated in the weekly sittings of the Exeter Vipassana group from January to May 2012, including attending a one day course of sitting meditation.

⁴⁸ This means that the retreat takes place at a property that does not belong to the Vipassana Trust, requiring volunteers to adjust the space to make sure the retreat is organized according to the general model (see chapter IV).

Conducting participant observation in the Vipassana retreats was particularly challenging because one is not supposed to read, write or take notes, and the 10 days are spent in silence. Since the practice consists of sitting meditation, with the eyes closed, limited observation can be undertaken while meditating at the same time, not to mention that meditation itself is a private practice generating a diversity of mental states, some of them challenging. The data I obtained consisted fundamentally of instructions on how to meditate; organizational aspects; some incidents that took place (one of my roommates in the second retreat became aggressive, and had to be expelled) and, of course, my personal experiences. As previously mentioned, writing was forbidden, and although the control over such activities seemed lax (since there was no one controlling what happened in the semi-privacy of the residential quarters), I was sharing my room with other people, and self-censorship prevented me from publicly engaging in “intellectual” behaviour such as taking notes. In fact, in the first retreat I shared a small room with two other people, and we benefited from comfortable beds and good heating. In the second retreat, I had to share a Tepee with three other people, and the conditions weren’t particularly pleasant – for instance, the mattress was really small and sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night sleeping on the hard floor. Since I wasn’t by myself, I had to adopt “guerrilla tactics”, doing undercover research. I had a small hygiene bag that I carried with me every time I went to the bathroom, and there I had my small notebook where I wrote all the experiences, observations and other aspects that I found relevant. In the second Vipassana retreat this task proved quite difficult – although I was slightly more experienced in this “undercover writing”, the lighting wasn’t sufficient to see everything that I was doing, so I had to strategically place a flashlight during my bathroom visits to properly conduct the task at hand. Later on, after the retreats, I used those notes (as well as other materials provided during the 10-day course, such as the code of conduct) to prepare a summary of the whole “experience”.

Doing research at the Zen monastery proved to be much easier. In fact, minutes after arriving for the first time, I had contact with another social scientist who was also conducting research there, and I realized that this tradition had little or no reservations concerning qualitative research on meditation. Every

night, before falling asleep, I wrote extensive notes in my notebook, summarizing the experiences of the day, the practices undertaken and other aspects I considered relevant for the research. In fact, some of the other participants also had their own diaries, and the practice of writing was well-accepted. I brought my recorder with me and I also managed not only to interview other retreatants but also to record an event where some old practitioners shared their experiences with the practice, as well as one occasion when the bells were being played for an ordination ceremony.

The local groups were also particularly helpful to provide an idea of how these practices are maintained “outside” the retreat environment, and how subjective dispositions are deployed throughout daily life, supported by the set of technologies promoted by these movements. The days dedicated to intensive practice were also important to understand how these micro versions of the retreat are put in place – what kinds of activities, performances, discursive instructions and materials are mobilized?

Participant observation was crucial to obtain data on various aspects: how these retreats are organized (including aspects of regulation, spatial partitioning, architectural devices and associations between humans and non-humans), the performances that are enacted by these traditions (the various technologies of meditation) and also theoretical aspects promoting certain hermeneutics of experience (in Plum Village there are regular Dharma Talks during the winter retreat and in the Vipassana retreats there are the evening discourses of S. N. Goeka and also the interactions between assistant teachers and students).

III.III THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Another “instrument” that I found highly useful were semi-structured interviews. Since there are two case studies, I managed to interview 12 participants of each tradition, plus another participant who was relatively experienced in both, as well as an expert in meditation also familiarized with the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. I wanted to interview beginners (like myself) and

long term participants. Regarding the Zen tradition, this task wasn't particularly difficult. I managed to convince most of the people I approached in Plum Village to be interviewed, and during my first retreat I conducted 6 interviews with both recent and "old" practitioners. I explained that I was conducting a PhD research and that I wanted to know about their experiences with meditation. Afterwards, and since I was part of the local meditation group linked to the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, I managed to interview other experienced participants, including a Dharma Teacher. My interview "script" underwent various changes throughout the years of research, but my questions were open ended, and they focused on the experiences with different practices of meditation; the various ethical, mental and somatic changes experienced by individuals; the effects of meditation in everyday life; the importance of the community of practice and of notions such as impermanence and Interbeing (see chapter V)⁴⁹. In the case of

⁴⁹ My Vipassana interview script included the following questions: "When was the first time you went to a Vipassana retreat? Motivations; reasons...; When did you start practicing Vipassana regularly? (Sitting everyday, etc., making Vipassana part of your life)...; What do you feel when you practice Vipassana?; What do you feel when you practice Metta? and Apanana?; Have you been through any non ordinary experience(s) you would like to share? Are they important?; Is it common to experience dissolution/ feeling the inside of the body, organs, etc? ; What about gross sensations turning into subtle ones; according to your experience when/why does this happen?; Have you experienced Bangha? Was outside reality different after experiencing dissolution? (Were things vibrating, etc.); Could you please elaborate on the evolution of equanimity and awareness throughout the years of practice?; Do you agree that Vipassana is a path of purification? If so, and according to your experience, how do equanimity and awareness contribute, through practice, to the eradication of Sankharas?; Do you think it's common to have old memories coming up during Vipassana? Are they linked to physical sensations/sankharas?; Regarding awareness, could you please elaborate on the importance of vibrations for this practice? How do they affect the retreats or daily practice, for instance? What about the vibrations of other people?; How do you apply Vipassana and awareness of sensations in daily life? Is there any situation when you resort to Metta or Anapana?; How do you use equanimity in daily life, for instance if a challenging situation arises (someone being rude, shouting at you, etc)?; Do you think Vipassana transformed your habit patterns? The types of thoughts you have, for instance (compassion, etc)?; Are you more aware of emotions? Is this generated by the awareness of sensations (correlations between mind/emotions/sensations)?; Could you please elaborate on the importance of Sila?; Some people, in the beginning of their meditative journey, struggle with physical pain, lack of concentration, etc. How have you learned to deal with these issues?; Could you please tell me about the importance of participating in a retreat? What about daily sittings?; Is it fair to

Zen practitioners, I also included some questions on the social and political aspects of this form of Engaged Buddhism⁵⁰. These conversations, in some cases, didn't follow the structure of a "script", and I explored various different aspects according to the answers and willingness of the participants.

In the case of Vipassana, it was much more difficult to find interviewees. First of all, we are dealing with retreats conducted in silence, and talking to other retreatants is only allowed at the beginning (before the course starts) and from the 10th day onwards. Conducting interviews at these retreats was impossible. Initially, I attempted to interview assistant teachers. I sent an e-mail to two assistant teachers (a married couple) in Portugal, where I'm originally from, but they refused, stating that "We're sorry that your research proposal was not accepted. However, we wish you plenty of success with your doctoral project."⁵¹ After contacting a friend of mine who is linked to this organization, I

say that Vipassana transformed your life? If so, how?; According to your personal experience, what are the most important benefits of Vipassana?"

⁵⁰ This is the script I used to interview Zen meditators in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh: "Do you remember the first time you went to Plum Village?; How many times have you been here?; Could you tell me about the most relevant experiences with: Sitting meditation / Walking meditation / Eating meditation / Working meditation and also with other practices you consider relevant (touching the earth, looking deeply, etc)?; Regarding these practices of mindfulness, how do they make you experience your body and mind? Could you give me some concrete examples?; What did you learn about yourself? ; Do you keep a regular practice of meditation? ; What are/were the main difficulties to practice mindfulness? How did you overcome these difficulties?; What is the importance of the teacher, Thay, his presence and teachings for the practice of mindfulness? Do you have any particular episode with Thay you recollect and want to share? ; How does mindfulness affect your experience of mind and body? Could you give me some examples? ; During the practice of mindfulness did you have any nonordinary experience? Could you please describe it? ; Do you use gathas to meditate? Do you have gathas in your house/bedroom? Are these gathas yours or written by Thay?; This practice talks a lot about watering good seeds, such as the seed of mindfulness. How do you water your positive seeds? Have you abandoned any habits?; How does mindfulness affect inter-personal relationships?; Do you think the practice affected how you deal with animals, plants and minerals?; What about in terms of politics? ; What is the importance of Interbeing for your meditation practice? How do you apply the five mindfulness trainings in your daily life?; Do you consider the Sangha important for the practice?; Do you consider that mindfulness transformed your life? Could you give me some examples?

⁵¹ In the email I sent them initially I didn't mention the questions I was going to ask, but I presented my research project and stated that I was interested in

was told that it was unusual for the organization to support research projects or to have Assistant Teachers give interviews. At this point, I only had one case study, Vipassana meditation, and I started to realize that, since this organization was not going to help me and it would therefore be difficult to interview a good number of subjects, the ideal course of action would probably be to add other case studies: from that moment on (this was by the end of my first year) I decided to include the Zen tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. After consulting more academic literature on the organization of S. N. Goenka, I realized that other researchers had come across similar problems. Aspasia Leledaki, who completed her PhD at the University of Exeter, reports in her doctoral dissertation the problems she encountered while studying this tradition of Vipassana:

“My initial meditation group turned out to be a ‘blind alley’ as I met a lot of resistance from Goenka’s Vipassana meditation assistant teachers to allow this research project any formal access either for interviewing teachers or practitioners. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not surprising considering the ‘conservative’ and ‘preservationist’ attitude his tradition has. Indeed, these very cautious and closed attitudes make it a very interesting group to study in the future should access be gained.” (Leledaki, 2007: 106)

Paul Solomon, who wrote an interesting book on the phenomenological experiences of psychologists who meditate, also reports similar problems with this Vipassana organization. He attempted to recruit participants for his study, but the organization did not help him:

“I also e-mailed three Vipassana meditation centres in Australia and one in the UK, attaching information sheets and consent forms describing the study, but they were unable to put me in touch with any potential participants. This was disappointing, especially since the manager of the English centre submitted my information sheet and consent form to the Vipassana Ethics committee in Switzerland, which approved my request on the grounds that the study might encourage psychotherapists to practice Vipassana.” (Solomon, 2008: 32)

understanding how “certain practices alter how humans experience their bodies and minds, as well as their impacts on ethics”.

After contacting an old student who is also a social researcher, I was told that this organization is not interested in independent research; usually, in order to be granted the possibility to conduct research with their support it is necessary to be a serious practitioner of Vipassana – this means meditating for varying lengths of regular extended practice, attending retreats, serving in courses and, of course, having privileged links with the national “Vipassana Trust”, the association, in each country, responsible for running these courses. In fact, this organization even has its own “Research Institute”, called the “Vipassana Research Institute”⁵², which produces different reports and “papers” on Vipassana meditation, although these do not go through the regular mechanisms of “scientific” assessment, such as double blind peer review.

Aware of the fact that I wouldn’t be helped by the organization, and after deciding that I would include another case study (whose “organization” didn’t oppose my study), I carefully identified some participants to be interviewed. Initially, I followed an opportunistic sampling, approaching those individuals with whom I had developed a connection: because they were sitting next to me, because they were also Portuguese or just because they were also interested in academic research. Most of these participants had attended between 2 and 5 retreats. Then, after joining the local sitting group in Exeter, I attempted to interview older students, those who have been practicing for more than 10 or 20 years. This task was particularly difficult, because I already knew that those who practice for a long time become affiliated to the organization, therefore there is a greater chance of “embodying” the official policy regarding research (namely its rejection). I approached those who were practicing for longer. In one case, one of them asked me to send him the questions beforehand. I did so (I sent him the interview script) but unfortunately my interview was rejected, with the potential interviewee stating that “These are not questions I would like to discuss. I hope you are able to find others to help you with this research project.” Another experienced meditator I approached also politely refused to be interviewed, suggesting me to interview other meditators in the area (one of them was the author of the email I quoted), although he provided me with some material on Vipassana, due to his privileged links to the organization (he was part of the

⁵² <http://www.vridhamma.org/>

Vipassana Trust). Through this local group, I managed to interview two “old students” who have been practicing for more than 20 years, which was extremely helpful. However, in one case I was asked to send an e-mail with the questions beforehand, and I had to insist to conduct the interview. In the other case, initially I was met with great enthusiasm, since my research was considered highly interesting, and after the interview this person told me I would be given more material on a specific social application of Vipassana. However, before I could be given such material, permission had to be granted by the main Vipassana centre in the UK, Dhamma Dipa. The assistant teachers in charge of the centre refused to grant me access to those materials, and this interviewee told me that “the centre teacher does not favour getting involved in research projects.” The rest of the email read like this:

“They gave me some detailed explanations of why The Vipassana Trust are not involved in research projects, one reason being to respect the privacy of the meditators, along with participant pre-selection bias, (all participants are already meditators), and the possibility of negative findings being published. The Vipassana Trust feel that they are already well informed....”

In sum, one can induce, according to this information, that they are not particularly interested in academic research on their “practice” conducted by those who are not affiliated with the tradition for a long time, eventually to avoid criticism, according to an informant. Therefore, they try to produce their own “research” through the Vipassana Research Institute, or through the work of professionals affiliated to this tradition (such as Paul Fleischman, a psychiatrist). Another interesting aspect is that the discursive branch of Vipassana (meaning the discursive apparatus linked to this practice, namely the books written by Goenka and his daily discourses in the 10-day “course”) promotes the idea that this technology of the self is “scientific” (see chapter V) – one is experiencing reality as it is – the Buddha, who supposedly rediscovered this ancient practice, is considered a scientist of the mind and matter and various examples are given justifying the “scientificity” of this practice, in a modernist sense, since it is about “cause and effect” (the law of Karma)⁵³. Consequently, Vipassana is the

⁵³ See chapter V for a reflection on Vipassana’s claims of “scientificity”.

privileged instrument to access “truth” (therefore its definition as “seeing things as they truly are”), requiring not only a deep epistemological operation of the individual to “embody” this truth through the transformation of regular automatisms, performances etc., but also turning the practice of meditation into the highest form of knowledge. Since meditation assumes this epistemological status, it is only through practice, through the experiential wisdom granted by meditation that one achieves “truth” – Goenka, during the discourses, gives plenty of examples confirming this assumption, and in some instances he even criticizes academic knowledge for being too abstract⁵⁴. Consequently, the Vipassana organization, instead of relying on external and academic mechanisms to assess the “validity” of practice, promotes meditation as a technology of epistemological and scientific truth. As one of my informants, linked to the Vipassana Trust, told me, the assistant teachers refused to be interviewed because they would rather have people experiencing meditation for themselves, demanding their participation in the retreats along with the various instances of subjectification (including forms of institutional affiliation) that constitute them.

Although I encountered some difficulties to find research subjects, I managed to identify a reasonable number of practitioners that agreed to be interviewed. All the interviews were recorded, and most were transcribed (namely those conducted with long-term practitioners). In the other cases, I listened to the interviews and I took notes of the most important ideas and passages. Overall, the interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. All the

⁵⁴ In one of the central books of this tradition, the “Art of Living”, Goenka tells the story of a young professor who, while travelling on a boat, was asking an old sailor if he knew anything about oceanography, geology or meteorology. Since this member of the crew was an illiterate, with no academic background, the young professor told him that he had wasted three quarters of his life (since he didn’t know anything about the three central branches of knowledge supposedly directly relevant to his work). The next day the sailor asked the academic if he knew anything about swimology, if he could swim. Since the professor didn’t have any practical knowledge (he couldn’t swim), the sailor told him he had wasted all his life, because the ship had struck on a rock and would sink, and those who couldn’t swim would die. The moral is that “You may study all the “ologies” of the world, but if you do not learn swimology, all your studies are useless. You may read and write books on swimming, you may debate on its subtle theoretical aspects, but how will that help you if you refuse to enter the water yourself? You must learn how to swim.” (Hart, 1987: 11)

interviews with Zen practitioners were conducted face-to-face; in the Vipassana case study, I conducted three interviews by telephone, since I found it was impossible to interview the subjects during the retreat and it was also quite expensive to travel long distances to their homes. All the names of the participants were changed to protect their identities. Since, in meditation retreats, participants were segregated by gender, the majority of interviewees were male (approximately 70%). As I stated in chapter I, the vast majority of participants in this study were westerners, and most of them were between 25 and 45 years old.

These interviews were particularly relevant for the chapters on experiences and meditation in everyday life. They gave me an idea of what people experience when they practice meditation and helped me to understand how daily lives are informed by meditative practices, how these are used in non-institutional settings and how the continuity of practice produces a certain number of effects on people. Moreover, the interviews with the Zen practitioners helped me, in some cases, to reflect on the connections between meditation and forms of social action (see chapter VIII).

III.IV AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

According to Ellis et al. (2010), “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)”. I chose to do a PhD on meditation partly because I was curious about new possibilities of experiencing myself through different practices, and I thought that meditation would be a fantastic learning opportunity. Therefore, this research is not merely academic, it is also part of a personal process of self-discovery that can, obviously, be problematic, since, according to Gill, one of the tenets of neo-liberal subjectivity is the identification between pleasure and work - there is no differentiation between work and the self (Gill, 2009). However, one should also bear in mind that, in the ideal world, work should be meaningful, and although I might have been co-opted by neo-liberal logics, it

would have been difficult to study meditation without having a clue of what it is all about.

Moreover, the associations between self-experimentation and academic research are not novel or limited to the topic of meditation. The discovery of *Helicobacter Piloni* by Barry Marshall or the creation of maps of alternative dimensions of reality by John C. Lilly involved a total commitment with the project at hand, jeopardizing the safety of the researcher (see Lilly, 1972). According to Lilly, this corresponds to the application of the Bazett-Haldane principle: “Do on yourself what you would do on others before you do it on others” (Lilly, 1988: 125). In my case, embracing meditation research was a form of embodying what Huxley called the non-verbal humanities, “the arts of being directly aware of the given facts of our existence” (Huxley, 1963: 62). Embracing meditation as a technology of the self was not merely a by-product of “fieldwork”, such as the “obligation” of attending retreats to obtain relevant data - it assumed an existential dimension, in the sense that I tried to learn and to reshape myself through these arts of living. The fact that I had two case studies was complicated – Vipassana and Zen, as projects of the self, are constituted by different technologies that have to be embodied. They also have different “conceptions” of what constitutes a regime of the self. In Vipassana courses, participants are taught three distinct techniques: one focusing on the breath, another one on a proprioceptive gaze and finally a loving-kindness technology. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen, we find a multiplicity of techniques that include meditation but also verbalization (in some cases accompanying meditative practices) and various forms of deploying mindfulness in daily life. In Vipassana, the art of living is the continuous practice of meditation (attending retreats, maintaining daily sittings, attending meditation groups affiliated to this tradition, etc.); in Zen, we can practice various techniques, not necessarily in a specific order, and it is also possible to use the technique of Vipassana as one of the various tools for self-cultivation.

Although the two Vipassana retreats proved to be highly interesting, generating various altered states, the emergence of some deep rooted

memories and even transpersonal episodes⁵⁵, I felt a deeper connection with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and practices; not only I found his proposal of engaged Buddhism particularly insightful and illustrative of a link between self-cultivation and social activism but I also resonated with the various practices of mindfulness that he advocates. By the end of my first retreat, I had the chance to take the five mindful trainings, a formal ceremony where one commits to follow the ethical guidelines of this tradition, involving the attribution of a Dharma name, and since then (this was in March 2011) I have tried to maintain a regular practice of mindfulness.

Since I had no regular practice of meditation before starting the PhD, my insights and experiences are still limited but, at the same time, highly valuable to highlight the contrast between meditative and nonmeditative paradigms of the self, helping me understand the ontological politics of meditation. Meditative cultivation is a life-long project, and since I am still in the first stages of the practice, the perspective I will be able to offer is from the point of view of a beginner. However, the experiences I have been through opened up new ways of experiencing myself and the world, and although I am far from being an accomplished meditator, I feel that only by practicing one is able to write about these technologies of the self. This means that, in order to research meditation, one has necessarily to develop a certain understanding of this practice that contrasts with academic techniques and modes of reasoning.

In fact, Johnson (2002), an academic and also a promoter of somatic practices⁵⁶, argues that academic selves are shaped by specific techniques (scholar-shaping techniques), such as sitting, writing or speaking. These techniques are recruited to fabricate what we could call the academic, critical or analytical mind, able to interpret the world according to certain theoretical lenses. In order to learn how to meditate, I had to resort to other techniques. I was "forced" to accept certain aspects, such as the teacher and the practices; I had to sing (in Plum Village it is common to gather before walking meditation and to sing two or three songs); I had to sit straight trying not to move for one

⁵⁵ I will elaborate on these in chapter VI.

⁵⁶ These can include Yoga, the Alexander technique or Reich's bioenergetics, see Johnson (1986).

hour (it was painful!); I had to share some of my personal experiences with other meditators, etc.. In sum, this meant that I had to actively participate and embrace a new set of practices in order to develop experiential understanding of these projects of the self. In some cases, this created a conflict with my critical mind (namely during the painful Vipassana retreats), but as the days passed and the practice became deeper, I was able to “suspend” some of my criticism in order to see what meditation was all about. Basically this meant that, in order to access certain realms of experience, I had to detach myself from some “resistances” (such as my “academic” or “critical” mind) that were preventing me from fully embracing these practices. This represented a struggle of agency between two different regimes; in order to attain some degree of understanding of Vipassana or Zen, I had to do certain things that clashed with my habitual ways of being, and I felt that, if I were to produce a relatively accurate account of what meditation does, I had to “suspend” my intellectualism.

I kept an account of the experiences I went through during the four retreats I attended. In Plum Village, it was relatively easy to write down these experiences; regarding Vipassana retreats, sometimes (namely during the first retreat) I didn't have a chance to write every day, therefore I tried to remember what happened in the previous days. However, since some of the experiences are ineffable and hard to tackle through language, words are limited to describe what happens during meditation – there is no substitute for experience itself. After the retreats, I didn't use a diary to register what was happening during daily practice; therefore, I rely on memory to provide examples of some events that took place in everyday life (see chapter VII). Some of my experiences with these technologies of the self can be found in chapters VI and VII, but I would say that, in general, they helped me understand what it is like to be submitted to retreat assemblages, providing also the opportunity to dialogue and to create a bond with the interviewees, through the elicitation of my own difficulties and “successes”.

Autoethnography was, therefore, a central dimension of this research; it challenged the usual conceptions of academic work, transforming the researcher's self into the surface of emergence of practical understanding. It

also provided a strong ground to foster inter-subjectivity with meditators, helping me to make sense of their own experiences. Finally, I became more aware of how certain performances can also contribute to denaturalize other realms, such as the intellectual one, that usually sustains academic reflection. Through the observation of my own resistances, I realized that my critical self emerged as the result of a complex assemblage (involving the scholar-shaping techniques that Johnson wrote about but also specific institutional settings, internalized ambitions, etc.), and I learned that it could (and should) be suspended, allowing me to embrace other dispositions, namely meditative ones. The obvious limitations of this approach concern the fact that I might generalize the effects I experienced, therefore my take on meditation would be biased. However, since a number of interviews were conducted, the experience of other practitioners is also included.

III.V LITERATURE

Foucauldian studies of the self relied on the comprehensive analysis of literary sources to identify the transformation of discourse formations, the rules governing those discourses, those who were authorized to mobilize them, etc.⁵⁷. Subjectivities are considered a product of certain discursive regimes of truth and power, enacted through positive means. This means that discourses are embedded in a “general politics” of truth:

“Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (Foucault, 1980: 131)

⁵⁷ For a comprehensive assessment of the Foucauldian methodology, see Foucault, 2002.

Through the analysis of central literary sources for the constitution of forms of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980), it is possible to understand the various epistemological axes responsible for the fabrication of subjectivities as “effects” of power. Since my research is informed by the Foucauldian notion of technologies of the self, I could not ignore his methodological strategy to study various instances of subjectification. Consequently, I had to compile and analyze the most relevant literary sources concerning the two traditions under scrutiny. Through the analysis of these sources, I was able to identify the most relevant concepts; comprehensive formulations of meditative instructions; the history of these movements; their ontological assumptions (such as detailed explanations of impermanence or Interbeing); social applications of these movements; how one should experience the mind, body and environment using these technologies as mediators, etc. The literary “canon” of these movements is crucial to understand their projects of the self, how they constitute themselves as instances of subjectification and the teleological aspects of these meditative assemblages.

In order to identify the canonical literary sources informing these traditions, I followed different strategies. With Vipassana, these resources were relatively limited. Goenka is not a prolific writer, and some of the books available from this tradition are compilations of his discourses. On the website of Dhamma Dipa, the most important Vipassana centre in Europe, the various books “recommended” by this tradition are grouped according to different categories: readings for Vipassana meditators (with the books authored by S. N. Goenka and compilations of his discourses, etc.); Sayagyi U Ba Khin (a journal was compiled in English with the most important writings of Goenka’s teacher); Ven. Ledi Sayadaw and Ven. Webu Sayadaw (older Burmese teachers of Vipassana, supposedly maintaining the practice in its “pristine purity”) and Paul Fleischman (an American psychiatrist and academic who is an assistant teacher and a promoter of the practice), etc.. I focused on the writings of Goenka and U Ba Khin, understanding them as representing the discursive “regime of truth” of this tradition.

Regarding Thich Nhat Hanh’s case study, the task of identifying relevant literary sources is complicated, because we are dealing with the most prolific

writer of books on Zen in contemporary times. His books have different styles: in some cases, they can be read as self-help books; as manuals for serious meditators and/or monks; as historical accounts of political struggles; as dedicated to specific aspects of Buddhist practice or ontology and he also published poetry and children's books. In order to identify the discursive "core" of the practice, I talked with a long term lay practitioner and with the Abbot of one of the hamlets in Plum Village. It is not uncommon to use his books as a foundation for the practice, even before being in contact with his organization or retreat centres. That is not discouraged, whereas with Goenka's Vipassana one has to go through the 10-day system in order to actually learn the technique - one has to become an "old student", someone who has already completed a 10-day course, in order to attend the weekly sittings, or one-day retreats, while anyone can join the Sangha meetings of Hanh's organization.

This literature allowed me to identify the normative claims of these traditions, how different performative, spatial, ethical and experiential arrangements of individuals are linked to ontological assumptions and to certain versions of what people should be. Moreover, Thich Nhat Hanh's books also focus on social applications of meditation.

My methodology is not necessarily Foucauldian - I am not trying to constitute archaeologies or genealogies of meditative subjects through the analysis of the regimes of truth of Zen and Vipassana. What I am doing is providing a reflection on the enactment of certain ontologies of the self through the analysis of various axes of subjectification deployed by these movements. Although discourses may display certain powers, eliciting the aims of these various practices – equanimity or mindfulness, see chapter V - my approach is not merely discursive, in the sense that words are useless without the support of performances, spaces and nonhumans.

III.VI OTHER SOURCES

Since it was difficult to have access to Vipassana meditators who were willing to be interviewed (not to mention the problems with the main organization), I compiled dozens of reports of experiences with this practice that I found in blogs over the Internet. Since, nowadays, this is perhaps the most popular and disseminated Vipassana tradition worldwide, there are numerous blogs and websites providing first-person accounts of individuals attending these retreats. They are usually highly detailed and in some cases provide rich phenomenological accounts as well as eliciting the resistances of beginners to the practice, rules, hierarchies, etc.. These accounts are usually written by beginners, those who are attending their first retreat. I also found some online forums that helped me to understand more complex aspects of Vipassana. There, serious old students share their experiences and doubts with various aspects of the practice and its application in daily life. The Vipassana newsletters⁵⁸ were also particularly useful. Not only did they contain some texts authored by Goenka, clarifying some conceptual and practical aspects, but also some accounts of experiences and “benefits” of the practice, provided by old students. Although the tone can be apologetic and propagandistic, they illustrate the rhetoric and particularities of this technology of the self. In most cases, I attempted to use the data I collected, but these resources were useful to understand the official “discourse” of these movements.

Regarding Zen, I initially tried to obtain access to the Mindfulness Bell, the official magazine of this tradition since 1990. Since some of the issues were online, I downloaded and read some of them. Afterwards, I contacted some members of the Exeter Sangha (The White Lotus Sangha) to see if I could obtain access to the printed versions, but I didn't find it very practical to carry a large number of magazines with me from one place to another. I also contacted the editor of the journal in the US to see if it would be possible to buy a large number of editions, or if they could upload all the issues, from the very beginning of the magazine. They didn't have all the issues available for sale, but

⁵⁸ www.news.dhamma.org

fortunately after some months the whole collection became available online, which was very helpful⁵⁹. The Mindfulness Bell has hundreds of articles on Sangha building, social applications of mindfulness, ways of “embodying” the five mindfulness trainings, reflections on the practice, personal transformation through mindfulness, etc.. In sum, it is an extremely valuable source to understand this tradition, containing hundreds of articles written by Thich Nhat Hanh, monks, nuns and lay practitioners.

Popular books, written by long term Vipassana and Zen meditators, were also particularly useful. These books usually provide life histories of these individuals, describing their processes of self-transformation, the difficulties they encountered or the various phenomenological phenomena they went through. These helped me to understand how meditators write about their experiences, how they recruit conceptual apparatuses to interpret their practices and, in some cases, these publications also elaborate on the importance of teachers, such as Thich Nhat Hanh or S. N. Goenka, and can also include transpersonal episodes fostered by meditation.

Finally, I also relied on video resources to analyze social applications of Vipassana. There are three films about Vipassana in Prisons. The most famous one is called “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana” (1997), about Vipassana courses in the Tihar Central Prison in New Delhi and the Baroda Jail in Gujarat, India; there is also another film called “The Dhamma Brothers” (2008), about the introduction of these courses in the Donaldson Correction Facility in Alabama. Both of these movies were shot in facilities for males. There is also a documentary called “Changing from Inside” (1998), telling the story of Vipassana courses at the North Rehabilitation Facility (N.R.F.) of the King County jail in Seattle, Washington. These films draw on various aspects: the necessary material, spatial and institutional changes that have to be developed in order to organize prison courses; the “expectations” of directors, guards and prisoners; the experiences of inmates and their accounts of “self-transformation”. I watched these films and took notes of the most relevant

⁵⁹ All the archived issues are available online <http://www.mindfulnessbell.org/wp/> (Retrieved: 12/11/2012)

passages to understand how meditation was mobilized to enact institutional and personal transformation (see chapter VIII).

III.VII CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

One could argue that the movies on Vipassana in prisons are a form of propaganda – they were directed by Vipassana practitioners and can obviously transmit a biased picture of that particular application. Moreover, books written by Goenka or assistant teachers of Vipassana may tend to exaggerate the benefits of meditation and to ignore negative side effects (see chapter VII). In some cases, I relied on those sources (namely in chapter VIII) – including books written by Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers and videos produced by Vipassana followers.

These resources should not be dismissed as mere propaganda; they contain highly relevant information on the concepts and history of these traditions, how they understand selves and deal with social issues. Primary literature emerging from these traditions explains how relevant actors (such as Goenka, Thich Nhat Hanh and advanced practitioners) make sense of their experiences and why retreats are organized in particular ways; they describe in detail and contextualize the techniques of meditation and give very precise indications regarding self cultivation in everyday life.

One could also argue that there is an unbalance between the first four empirical chapters, where I relied on observations, interviews and my own experiences, and the chapter on social applications of meditation, mainly informed by movies and literature. Regarding the Vipassana case study, I actually conducted an interview to obtain data on a particular application⁶⁰; however, since the UK Vipassana Trust did not allow that person to grant me access to some relevant documents, I had to drop that case study. Initially I

⁶⁰ I cannot disclose what particular application it was because I don't want to compromise the source of information.

wanted to focus on two social applications of Vipassana, but since my plans were compromised by the secretive nature of the Vipassana Trust I had to focus on Vipassana in Prisons drawing upon films, personal accounts present in books and literature on the impacts of these courses⁶¹. Regarding Thich Nhat Hanh's case study, I used a variety of sources, including literature on engaged Buddhism (Hanh's model of social action has generated a considerable amount of scholarly literature), as well as interviews (I often asked interviewees if this tradition of engaged Buddhism had an impact on their social/political views). This chapter does not involve as much fieldwork as the other ones because its aim is to reflect on the connections between technologies of the self and models of social action and transformation – the movies on Vipassana in prison allow me to understand how the retreat apparatus is “mobilized”, and I couldn't go back to the sixties to understand how Thich Nhat Hanh used meditation in the peace movement during the Vietnam war, therefore I relied on a variety of sources to reflect on his well documented efforts. In order to explore the links between meditation and ecology I used not only data from participant observation at retreats in Plum Village, but I extended my reflections through the analysis of a meditation-based exercise developed by Joanna Macy, John Seed and others (see chapter VIII). I also contacted (by e-mail) a lay practitioner in charge of the Happy Farm in Plum Village, and I was given detailed information about this interesting project. I also had the chance to interview the founder of an environmentalist political party in Portugal, who is also the leader of the national Buddhist Union, allowing me to understand the connections between meditation and ecology.

III.VIII CONCLUSION

In order to provide an account of forms of meditative subjectification and their politics, I conducted semi-structured interviews; I participated in retreats, observing the multitude of apparatuses that emerge in order to allow meditative

⁶¹ These articles, although published in peer reviewed journals, were, in some cases, written by Vipassana meditators, which can obviously lead us to question their “objectivity”, reminding us of previous research on TM meditation, see chapters V and VIII.

dispositions and reflected on my own experiences; I immersed myself in the central literature of these movements and I also relied on other sources (including blogs, videos, newsletters, etc) that I considered relevant.

My approach is influenced by post-humanist STS, as the literature review and introduction have suggested. These various methodologies are inspired by a performative concern. Meditation is entangled with specific struggles of agency, involving new associations with performances, nonhumans and spaces. My analysis is post-humanist because processes of meditative subjectification are not understood as the result of humans and their intentions, such as the leaders of these movements (as pastoral authorities), the assistant teachers (those who “ensure” that the leader is being represented) or human communities/groups (including monasteries or practice centres). In fact, my approach takes Callon’s (1986) claim of agnosticism (the impartiality between humans and nonhumans) seriously, recognizing that without these heterogeneous associations meditative selves cannot emerge. If Pickering argues that the performative idiom regards science as “a field of powers, capacities and performances, situated in machinic captures of material agency” (Pickering: 1995: 7), a post-humanist approach to meditation inevitably recognizes the power of nonhumans. Moreover, if we understand Vipassana and Zen projects of the self as forms of subjectification, they are not necessarily the result of a top down hierarchy, with their leaders at the top of the pyramid, giving specific orders and making sure that people are “subjected” according to their pastoral powers. In fact, these “projects of the self” emerge within heterogeneous assemblages composed of technologies, performances, discourses, verbalizations and a set of material powers.

The following chapter will reflect on the first vector of subjectification, the setting, comprising new associations with spaces, constraints and nonhumans that should ideally foster transformations of selfhood, bringing forth meditative dispositions.

IV. SETTING

“The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting. Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time. Setting is physical — the weather, the room’s atmosphere; social — feelings of persons present towards one another; and cultural — prevailing views as to what is real.” (Leary, Metzner and Dass, 1976: 11)

“Contrary to non-humans, humans have a great tendency, when faced with scientific authority, to abandon any recalcitrance and to behave like obedient objects... Human science laboratories rarely explode!” (Latour, 2004: 217)

IV.I INTRODUCTION

In order to transform automatisms and to unveil new ways of being in the world, human subjects have to be exposed to novel settings. Zen and Vipassana retreats function as instances of subjectification. They break regular connections and suspend the habitual environments that subjects are exposed to, submitting them to a series of productive constraints that destabilize them, inviting them to establish new associations and to engage in different, nonmodern types of subjectivity.

Zen and Vipassana retreats are supported by a number of devices that include forms of managing space (such as spatial partitioning, see Foucault, 1995), nonhumans, regulations and instructions. These new associations transform Zen and Vipassana retreats into heterogeneous assemblages (Delanda, 2006) that suspend modern distinctions between nature and culture (Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1991a); both humans and nonhumans are essential

elements of the setting, a new psychospiritual (D'andrea, 2007) landscape that brings forth new ways of being. These assemblages are positive in the sense that, by altering habitual connections between humans, nonhumans, spaces and technologies, regular automatisms are progressively transformed, prompting new experiences. We can think of these retreats as ways of suspending the conventional networks of the outside world, entangling subjects with new webs of association that can trigger affordances unavailable to the dualist modern self.

Vipassana and Zen assemblages use different strategies and webs of associations to bring forth new realms of experience. The typical mechanism of initiation to Vipassana is the 10-day retreat. These retreats can be understood as “standard operating procedures”⁶², relatively homogeneous and transposable assemblages that can emerge anywhere in the world. The Vipassana retreats are formations that entangle a variety of human and nonhuman devices: audio and video tapes with instructions; cushions that support the practice of sitting meditation; vegetarian food prepared according to a cookbook; timetables that have to be scrupulously followed; technologies of the self; regulations that manage individual existence; Assistant Teachers (ATs) who can travel long distances to represent the teacher (Goenka), ensuring the homogeneity of this assemblage; servers who volunteer to spread the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha, in Pali), through the reproduction of these retreats; beginners with no experience in meditation; old students who are submitting themselves to the assemblage once again, etc..⁶³

⁶² This term comes from scholarly work in International Relations. For a good discussion of the concept, including the negative impacts generated by such procedures, see Ramsbotham (2000).

⁶³ Even if someone is well experienced in other types of meditation, if he or she hasn't experienced the Vipassana retreat in the tradition of S. N. Goenka he is considered a new student, and after completing the 10 days he/she acquires a new status, that of an old student. Old students are given a username and password that they can use to access the websites of the Vipassana organization, download podcasts, papers of the Vipassana Research Institute, discovering local sitting groups, enrolling in courses as “students” or “servers”, and eventually attending other types of retreats (20-days and 30-days retreats and also thematic ones). In sum, the retreat grants spiritual and institutional existence to the subject – he becomes established in the “Dhamma.” In terms of

Although Thich Nhat Hanh's retreats do not follow any standard or pre-defined "model", their assemblages are populated by a diversity of humans and nonhumans, including Dharma Teachers (ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh), monks and lay members of this tradition (wearing their characteristic brown jackets); books of Thich Nhat Hanh; bells; pictures of ancestors that are carefully placed to form the "ancestors' shrine"; small statues of the Buddha; cushions (or even stools or chairs); vegetarian food; relatively well regulated instances of dialogue and sharing between practitioners and the diversity of practices promoted by this tradition. However, although there are these common elements, as well as forms of institutional affiliation⁶⁴, it is possible, for instance, to attend the weekly meetings of the Sangha (community of practice) or a mindfulness day without having participated beforehand in a formal retreat in a monastic setting such as Plum Village. Thich Nhat Hanh is a widely published author and his books include comprehensive and detailed instructions on meditation, while Goenka explicitly recommends the participation in a course⁶⁵.

Despite these differences, Zen and Vipassana retreats aim at transforming subjectivities, fostering a paradigm shift of the self. Foucault suggested the term "heterotopias" to characterize "other spaces" that invert, contest but also represent other cultural sites⁶⁶. He gave various examples, such as boarding schools, brothels, colonies, cemeteries and museums. An interesting example is the mirror - it counteracts the position one occupies and, by doing so, reconstructs subjectivity through the gaze:

access, Vipassana contrasts with Hanh's organization, which allows anyone to attend local meetings and days of mindfulness, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

⁶⁴ Such as becoming a monk, taking the five mindfulness trainings or becoming a member of the Order of Interbeing.

⁶⁵ "The first experience of Vipassana must be in an organized 10-day course, under the guidance of a qualified teacher." (Hart, 1987; 138)

⁶⁶ Foucault defined heterotopias as "real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable." (Foucault, 1997: 332)

“Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.” (Foucault, 1997: 332)

Retreats function as spaces that counteract common worldly environments, inverting their logics, displacing subjectivities and multiplying new connections that alter one’s automatisms, supporting a transition towards a nonmodern paradigm. In order to do so, these Zen and Vipassana heterotopias rely on a diversity of generative *dispositifs*, reconfigurations of habitual associations that allow selves to attain novel dispositions in different environments. Zen and Vipassana retreats combine a series of *dispositifs* to transform habitual automatisms: these include forms of entering the retreat assemblage (registration devices); regulations (devices of positive constraint); the management of space (devices that reorganize and partition space, that manage environmental interactions and that inscribe space with particular signs) and materialities (nonhuman devices, solid entities that support Zen and Vipassana webs of associations). The aim of this chapter is to explore retreats as heterotopian networks, contrasting them with their modern counterparts and analyzing how these assemblages reconfigure selves.

IV.II ENTERING THE RETREAT ASSEMBLAGE

As in every reconfiguration of subjective experience, selves have to go through a series of steps before they are able to enter Zen and Vipassana retreats. Actions such as buying tickets, going through x-ray machines and presenting a passport are usually conducted before entering the airplane. One usually spends some minutes in a room, waiting for the pre-boarding announcement, which is also accompanied by another series of rites, such as showing a boarding pass, etc.. Schivelbusch’s remarks on the waiting room, representing a transition from regular life to the train experience, are quite insightful concerning the phenomenon of entering a new assemblage:

“The traveller’s sojourn in the waiting room, that hiatus in the passage of traffic from city to railway was perhaps the clearest indication of the station’s function as a gateway. One might say that the pause was necessary to enable the traveller to cope with the change in the quality of space.” (Schivelbusch, 1977: 177)

In order to participate in these retreats, subjects have to register in advance, they have to fill in a registration form⁶⁷, sharing some information with the institution⁶⁸. The Vipassana registration form contains some of the following questions: name, native language, other languages understood and nationality. Then, there are questions specifically dealing with one’s spiritual practice⁶⁹.

The Vipassana application form is a comprehensive instrument to assess one’s experience with technologies of the self, mental and physical health and aspects such as age, contact details or nationality. The application form to

⁶⁷ The course application form is available here - <http://www.dhamma.org/en/docs/forms/appform-en.pdf> (Retrieved: 12/09/2013)

⁶⁸ The transformation of subjectivity and the production of knowledge on humans are intertwined, as Foucault’s reflections on subjectification suggested (Foucault, 1987; 1995; 2007). In order to manage populations and to conduct changes at the individual level, registries, forms of inscribing the knowledge on individuals, their habits, the regularities of life and death are crucial.

⁶⁹ “Have you had any previous experience with meditation techniques, therapies or healing practices? ... Do you teach or practice these techniques/therapies on others?” If the answer is yes, one has to provide explanations. Then, and since we are dealing with mechanisms with the potential to radically reshape the self, some questions, on the general health of the participant, are included:

“Do you have any physical health problems, medical conditions or diseases? If yes, please give details (dates, symptoms, duration, treatment, and present condition); Do you have, or have you ever had, any mental health problems such as significant depression or anxiety, panic attacks, manic depression, schizophrenia, etc.? If yes, please give details (dates, symptoms, duration, hospitalization, treatment, and present condition); Are you now taking, or have you taken within the past two years, any alcohol or drugs (such as marijuana, amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine, heroin, or other intoxicants)? If yes, please give details (dates, types, amounts, addictions, treatment, and present use).” According to online reports, some people have been prevented from attending these retreats because they were taking psychiatric drugs or were practicing alternative therapies such as Reiki, a form of energy manipulation that can clash with Vipassana (where energy is not manipulated but merely observed). According to the code of conduct, people with serious mental disorders should not practice Vipassana, therefore these questions are used to prevent those with psychiatric problems from attending retreats.

attend a retreat in Plum Village is less comprehensive⁷⁰. It basically focuses on personal data, including aspects of institutional affiliation (have you taken the five mindfulness trainings or the 14 mindfulness trainings?). Then, there is a section on the arrival date, emergency contacts and the preferred accommodation (unlike Vipassana retreats, staying in Plum Village involves paying a fee).

After filling in these forms and submitting them, one is able to enter the physical space dedicated to the practice. However, before the course (or the retreat) starts, it is necessary to go through another device. At the Vipassana retreats, one has, once again, to fill in a form that is similar to the first one. There is also a section where one should write a short biography and reaffirm the compliance with the rules of conduct. One is also asked to place electronic devices, notebooks and writing material in a locker (the participant keeps the key with him and by the 10th day he is allowed to collect everything), breaking all the connections with the outside world. Regarding Plum Village, after arriving one has to wait for a while before going to the registration room. On my first retreat there was a long period of waiting and I went for a walk with other participants before registering. New participants will be asked some few questions by a monk (do you have any experience with meditation, do you know what we do here?, etc.), usually involving some proximity with the subject⁷¹.

Filling in forms, waiting rooms, travelling long distances to the retreat and saying goodbye to electronic gadgets mark the beginning of the retreat experience. An important dimension of these assemblages is the alteration of habitual automatisms, and the set of regulations that are implemented contribute to support the transition to new paradigms of selfhood.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, <http://register.plumvillage.org/spring/nh> (Retrieved: 15/09/2013).

⁷¹ On my first retreat I was asked to sit close to the monk to answer these questions.

IV.III.I REGULATIONS

Regulations are positive constraints that allow selves to engage in new webs of associations, transforming their habitual ways of being in the world. These retreats are supported by a set of regulations and can be understood as total institutions, “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administrated round of life” (Goffman, 1968: 11). In order to administer meditators’ existence, these are submitted to a variety of constraints. These are interpreted in a positive sense, following Foucault’s understanding of power as productive, relying on a variety of devices (such as rules and architectural settings) to enact forms of subjectification: “Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” (Foucault, 1995: 194)

Regulations suspend habitual connections and create new habits, entangling the transformation of selves with a variety of constraints such as timetables. These are central devices of power in disciplinary institutions, controlling activity. Recognizing that timetables were developed by monastic communities, Foucault suggests that they produce three major effects: “establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition” (Foucault, 1995:149). In both traditions we find these devices. Below is an adapted timetable of a Vipassana retreat⁷²:

⁷² <http://www.dhamma.org/en/code.shtml>

TABLE 1 - VIPASSANA COURSE TIMETABLE

04:00	Wake-up bell
04:30 - 6:30	Meditate in the hall or room
06:30 - 8:00	Breakfast
08:00 - 9:00	Group meditation in the hall
09:00 - 11:00	Meditate in the hall or room according to instructions
11:00 - 12:00	Lunch
12:00 - 13:00	Rest and interviews with the teacher
13:00 - 14:30	Meditate in the hall or room
14:30 - 15:30	Group meditation in the hall
15:30 - 17:00	Meditate in the hall or own room according to instructions
17:00 - 18:00	Tea break
18:00 - 19:00	Group meditation in the hall
19:00 - 20:15	Teacher's Discourse
21:15 - 21:00	Group meditation in the hall
21:00 - 21:30	Question time
21:30	Retire to your room

In Zen retreats, we find a similar timetable⁷³:

TABLE 2 - PLUM VILLAGE DAILY TIMETABLE

5:00	Wake-up bell
5:45	Sitting meditation
7:30	Breakfast
9:00	Dharma talk, Class, or Sharing
11:00	Walking meditation
12:00	Lunch
13:00	Personal time
14:45	Working meditation
17:00	Sitting meditation & Chanting or other activities
18:30	Dinner
20:00	Personal Practice or other activities
21:30	Noble Silence
22:00	Lights Out

In Vipassana retreats, the schedule is scrupulously observed. If someone is missing in the Meditation Hall, one of the servers will call this person, ensuring that discipline is respected. One is also discouraged from leaving the hall during meditation – if that happens, one of the volunteers will immediately reach this person, telling him or her to return to meditation. In a couple of occasions me and my roommates didn't manage to wake up on time, and one of the servers came to our room telling us that it was "time to meditate". He was referring to the period between 4:30 - 6:30, when one is supposed to meditate in the room or in the meditation hall. There are also occasions when, due to the fatigue imposed by strict schedule, one falls asleep. I remember one situation when someone started snoring and a server immediately reached him, telling the participant to "be aware". These servers act to help meditators break their habitual automatisms: if they fall asleep, they will wake them up; if they are not in the meditation hall, they will be called; the servers ensure that regulations are

⁷³ <http://www.plumvillage.org/visiting-us/general-retreat-information.html>

followed, therefore contributing towards the transformation of automatisms, allowing participants to break habitual habits and to embrace Vipassana ones.

Regarding Plum Village retreats, the schedule can be changed or even ignored. There are also the “Lazy Days” - in order to create a contrast with outside life and its focus on work, one abstains from working or following spatial-temporal discipline. If the 10-day Vipassana retreats are carefully designed to introduce subjects to different techniques and experiences, Thich Nhat Hanh’s retreats are engaged approaches to meditative practice, speculums of daily life infused with meditative innovations. Therefore, the “recruitment” of the timetable is distinct: if, in Vipassana, it is aimed at establishing regularities, maximizing the times for meditation, regularizing the periods for sleeping, eating, etc, regarding Plum Village it is more of an invitation to practice collectively. If one is supposed to benefit from the presence of the community, the timetable indicates how one should do so, by joining a certain activity – meditation, exercise, walking together, etc.. In both cases, the timetable can be understood as a technology that delegates decision making to the community, allowing subjects to flow from one space/activity to another without having to think about it, suspending their will.

If the timetable manages temporalities, in Vipassana retreats we find a set of regulations aimed at creating meditative positivities. First, the typical Buddhist precepts have to be followed: to abstain from killing any being; to abstain from stealing; to abstain from all sexual activity; to abstain from telling lies; to abstain from all intoxicants. Then, there are other regulations: acceptance of the teacher and the technique; the prohibition of undertaking other techniques, rites, and forms of worship; noble silence (it is lifted on the 10th day); separation of Men and Women; no physical contact between participants; no yoga or physical exercise; religious objects cannot be used; no outside contacts; music, reading and writing are forbidden⁷⁴. For ten days, the totality of the individual, her physical and mental functioning, spatial and temporal possibilities are under control. These constraints resemble rites of passage, where subjects have to be detached from a stable set of cultural

⁷⁴ The full code of discipline is available here <http://www.dhamma.org/en/code.shtml> (Retrieved: 1/09/2013)

conditions and go through a new cultural realm that is “liminal” (Turner, 1969: 94). What is at stake here is not merely to impose a new set of “customary norms and ethical standards” (Turner, 1969: 94) but to foster new associations, ideally transforming human automatisms through a variety of constraints that should allow the emergence of new ways of experiencing the world.

With such a radical transformation of one’s regular habits, the imposition of a strict schedule and the teaching of new and challenging techniques of meditation (that can be practiced for more than 10 hours a day), one could argue that we are facing logics of shock. In fact, in order to have access to techniques supposedly containing the potential for self-transformation, subjects have to suspend their regular habits and associations. Therefore, we can draw some comparisons between this school of Vipassana and Ewen Cameron’s approach to psychiatric treatment, involving a radical depatterning (through shock) to rewrite and domesticate the soul: “With patients shocked and drugged into an almost vegetative state, they could do nothing but listen to the messages – for sixteen to twenty hours a day for weeks; in one case, Cameron played a message continuously for 101 days.” (Klein, 2007: 32). The notion of shock was actually used by one of my interviewees, Tim, to describe his first retreat experience:

“The first time I didn’t feel I was supported, I felt I was thrown in and left to drown. Which was probably an interesting experience for me at the time ... I was young, I probably needed a shock!” (Interview, Tim, April 2011)

In these retreats, one has to rely on a new performative, spatial and hierarchical regime that transforms the interaction order (one is prevented from interacting with others, unless one has some practical questions); dictates how and when one takes care of the body; manages the inputs the self receives (with no reading, no talking and no outside contacts, the subject is totally “exposed” to the technologies of the self and the daily discourses of S. N. Goenka, and the suspension of external inputs through sensory deprivation

enacts altered states of consciousness (see Lilly, 1977; Salter, 2010)) and governs how he or she can make sense of the experience⁷⁵.

These are strategies to bring forth a new version of selfhood, depending on the suspension of habitual webs of associations; selves have to be entangled with new networks – they have to maintain silence, following instructions given by the teacher, moving from one place to another according to a timetable; they have to submit their agency to the Vipassana assemblage, leaving their familiar environments in order to transform their automatisms.

In sum, we witness a radical process of changing one's habits, contrasting with the outside world, accompanied by the introduction of technologies of the self. However, the goal is not to produce more obedient and "normal" subjects (as in Klein's example) but to bring forth affordances (as we will see in chapters VI and VII) that emerge when associations are transformed. These devices (that resemble what, in total institutions, Goffman (1968) designated as instances of mortification), invite subjects to suspend their regular associations (performative, material, mental, regulatory) for a certain period of time and to engage in new couplings (with technologies of the self, timetables, regulations, architectural apparatuses) that should ideally foster a transformation of the self.

In Plum Village one also encounters a number of regulations: at lunch, one shouldn't start eating before a formal announcement is made, and one is supposed to undertake the five contemplations⁷⁶. These are meant to alter the

⁷⁵ Dialogue is limited to the brief interactions between student and assistant teacher, and every night there are discourses containing a variety of information, namely hermeneutical one, on Vipassana; moreover, the prohibition of writing is an attempt to slow down the internal dialogue, supported by verbalization, therefore somatising the retreat experience, since Vipassana is about observing sensations, not thinking, as it will become clear in chapter V.

⁷⁶ "THE FIRST CONTEMPLATION This food is a gift of the whole universe: the earth, the sky, numerous living beings, and much hard, loving work. THE SECOND CONTEMPLATION May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive this food. THE THIRD CONTEMPLATION May we recognize and transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat in moderation. THE FOURTH CONTEMPLATION May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of living beings; preserve our planet; and reverse the process of global

habitual performance of eating, establishing new connections with other beings and transforming eating into a form of meditation, as we will see in chapter V⁷⁷. This aspect complicates the distinction between rules and practices of meditation, suggesting that in Plum Village the “constraints” become a form of mindfulness. In one occasion, and due to distraction, I started eating before this formal announcement was made – instead of being explicitly reprimanded, a monk just looked at me and I realized that I should wait a bit longer, unlike the Vipassana retreats, where the servers are meant to take immediate action when regulations are broken.

In Plum Village there are no televisions and internet access is limited, although there is a phone booth that can be used and people can bring their own laptops; noble silence is observed from 21:30 until breakfast. Meditation, instead of being imposed externally and in a top down fashion, rather depends on the willingness of participants to be enacted. We could argue that Zen retreats are a form of commodified spirituality (Carrette and King, 2005), in the sense that one pays a determined sum of money to stay in Plum Village for a certain period of time. The amount varies, and it is usually something between 280 to 500 Euros a week - this sum can be reduced if one is a student (benefiting from a discount of 50%) or if he or she commits to work more often when needed.

However, and beyond the interpretation of these retreats as forms of commodified spirituality (some of my informants even compared Plum Village to a summer camp, stating that it wasn't “serious”), we shouldn't be naive about this apparent spiritual “liberalism”. The practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh are not so much forms of inducing altered states of consciousness through sitting and sensory deprivation (although these eventually happen, as we will see in chapter VI), but mechanisms to transform regular automatisms in daily life situations, including sitting, walking, talking and working. Meditation, in that sense, is not necessarily a specific practice or “technique” (such as Vipassana

warming. THE FIFTH CONTEMPLATION We accept this food in order to nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, build our community; and nourish our ideal of serving all living beings." (Hanh, 2009: 46)

⁷⁷ In that chapter, I will also explore some of the difficulties with eating meditation.

or the other technologies of the self promoted by S. N. Goenka) but a way of life that relies on different performances to maintain the same attitude of mindfulness. The retreat setting maintains elements and characteristics of daily life: one interacts with others, works, reads and even keeps contact with the outside world - in that sense, the Plum Village apparatus prepares individuals for the real world, not involving a total detachment but the penetration of “normal” practices by the spirit of mindfulness⁷⁸.

Consequently, we can argue that Vipassana and Zen retreats have different styles of recruiting legislative orders to enact positivities: on the one hand, Vipassana retreats explicitly suspend regular daily life connections, centralizing the performative and hermeneutical powers through a set of regulations that support the mastery of meditative techniques; on the other hand, Zen also deploys different practices and some regulations, but these are not necessarily mobilized to create isolations and separations (between the self and “non-meditative” sensorial inputs, regular habits or even other people) – their aim is the engagement with daily life, intentionally developed through regular activities in community. In that sense, the absence of a radical shift of one’s actions during these retreats of Plum Village is meant to train the self for all life situations, without a sole focus on typical forms of meditation (such as sitting meditation). This illustrates a contrast between a disciplinary model (in the case of Vipassana) and the neo-liberal conception of the entrepreneurial self (Foucault, 2008) (in the case of Zen), where self-management replaces conventional institutionalized mechanisms of power. This difference is reinforced by the different use of silence as a technology of the self. The permanent silence enacted at Vipassana retreats is colonized by instructions and brings selves back to the inner world, releasing memories and strong emotions; the quasi-maintenance of more conventional interaction orders found at Plum Village transforms silence into an option, a resource that can be

⁷⁸ The “engaged” nature of this tradition will become clear in chapters V and VIII.

mobilized by subjects if they intend to⁷⁹, avoiding a violent rupture with non-meditative/metropolitan/conventional uses of spatial forms of power/knowledge.

This means that, if Vipassana depends on mechanisms of destabilization that can be compared to forms of “shock”, depatterning and mortification, linked to “rites of passage”, forms of discipline enacted in controlled settings, the Zen assemblage has fluid boundaries and rules, and does not aim at radically inverting the habitual modern environment. As a form of engaged Buddhism, this Zen tradition is a preparation for everyday life, and the challenge is how to maintain mindfulness without the forms of isolation present in other formats, such as Vipassana retreats (see chapter VII).

IV.III. II REGULATIONS AND THE BATTLE OF AUTOMATISMS

The introduction of new regulations, whether by disciplinary (Vipassana) or liberal (Zen) mechanisms create forms of resistance – these new constraints, aiming at the transformation of automatisms, are not accepted without a fight. Foucault suggested that power always creates resistance (Foucault, 1987)⁸⁰, and the Vipassana assemblage, consisting of a radical transformation of human automatisms through new webs of associations, is particularly helpful to understand this aspect.

Although the timetable indicates when one should meditate in the room or in the meditation hall, it is not uncommon to sleep during these periods, in particular because most of the participants (this was my case) are not used to waking up at 4 PM. A significant number of participants are actually asleep, and during my first retreat practically all of my roommates didn't meditate during this period. Oversleeping, or falling asleep during early morning meditation,

⁷⁹ When someone decides to maintain silence during a particular period of time, he or she wears a sign saying “noble silence” to let others know of his/her choice.

⁸⁰ Regarding the enactment of power through spatial organisation, the work of Rofel (1992) explores some of the strategies developed by Chinese workers to “subvert” the scientific organization of labour brought by modernization.

represents a clash between automatisms – old automatisms, such as the habit of sleeping 7 or 8 hours per night, prevent participants from making the best use of the conditions and to fully respect the timetable.

Another form of subversion concerns transgressing spatial boundaries. One is not supposed to abandon the “total institution” during the 10-day period, and the boundaries are clearly marked; however, in various instances I saw people sneaking outside – both retreats were in rural areas, and it was possible to escape without being seen, and the barriers (a small wall or just some bushes) were easily overcome.⁸¹ Other forms of resistance involve talking (some students deliberately sought the course manager to complain about some problems, and although their problems could be real, this can also be understood as a strategy to cope with the suspension of verbalization)⁸²; deliberately making noise during the periods for meditation in the Hall⁸³; eating when it is not scheduled to do so⁸⁴; or even practicing forms of exercise⁸⁵.

⁸¹ On my second Vipassana retreat, at a non-permanent centre, the boundaries weren't particularly well-defined, and in one occasion I wandered for half an hour through the woods – since I was in a particularly sensitive state due to the intensive practice of Vipassana, this sort of “escape” was an interesting way to assess how the practice of meditation transformed my perception of nature. During these walks, I also observed other participants smoking, a practice that is deliberately forbidden (since tobacco is considered an intoxicant).

⁸² Another strategy of “resistance” deals with the process of accepting the teacher. After each meditation session there are chantings in Pali by Goenka, and students are supposed to repeat *sadhu* three times, an expression that shows appreciation or agreement (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/glossary.html#s> (Retrieved: 17/09/2013)): during my first retreat, instead of repeating *sadhu* I used the Portuguese word *sapo*, meaning frog, as a reference to the fact that Goenka is overweight, which initially made me doubt his spiritual “authority.” Another Portuguese speaking participant did the same thing (his personal experience is available here <http://www.livredesi.com/curso-de-vipassana-dia-01/> (Retrieved: 15/08/2012))

⁸³ Although it is common to cough, sneeze or to change posture when the pain becomes unbearable, there was one occasion, during my first retreat, when one of the youngest participants decided to fart out loud in such a way that it couldn't be accidental; after he did so, everyone started giggling, and eventually some of us laughed – one of the participants couldn't stop laughing and had to leave the Hall to calm down.

⁸⁴ One interviewee told me that he brought some bananas to the retreat and he would eat them at night while taking a shower.

⁸⁵ During the breaks between sittings it is common to stretch, but some people engage in more complex exercises, and in one occasion one participant started practicing advanced Yogic asanas, getting the attention of other retreatants.

However, the most radical form of subversion, considering that these retreats are basically “courses” for the establishment on specific technologies of the self, deals with the resistance towards the performative order imposed by this assemblage. In fact, since meditation is practiced in silence, it is possible to engage in other techniques, not necessarily advocated by the movement, taking advantage of the setting.⁸⁶

According to Foucault and Butler (Foucault, 1987; Butler, 1990), these episodes of subversion emerge within discourses⁸⁷, sites of resistance and power. Performative, legislative, material and discursive devices, enacting meditation assemblages, are not accepted without resistance. Episodes of subversion elicit a battle of automatisms with the constraints imposed by the Vipassana assemblage – instead of accepting new webs of association, becoming passive regarding meditative assemblages and abandoning themselves, participants develop strategies to keep their selves in control. Regulations, the control of activity, the spatial partitioning of bodies, practices and pastoral authorities (such as Goenka) are contested devices, creating struggles with the habitual automatisms of participants that in turn resist them, suspending the optimal application of the subjectification devices of the retreat.

This does not mean that all participants resist disciplinary devices. Rob, who is in his mid seventies, spent his childhood in Africa. He told me that the

⁸⁶ On my second retreat, I realized that this practice, solely focusing on sitting, was not for me, and I decided to practice walking meditation whenever I could to ease the transition between sitting, eating and other scheduled activities. In another occasion, I rebelled against the obligation of sitting for one hour and decided not to meditate as I was being told – I just started counting the breath until the end of the session. An old student, who practiced for 10 years but was eventually forbidden by the organization from attending more courses, wrote a testimonial, available online, where he states that: “in the long courses, I have met about 10 practitioners who secretly mixed their long courses with Zen, Advaita Vedanta, Tibetan visualizations, Hare Krishna Mantras, Energy-healing techniques or Bhang (cannabis).” - <http://vipassana.awardspace.info/forum/index.php?topic=9.0> (Retrieved: 15/08/2012)

⁸⁷ Here I’m explicitly referring to Foucault’s assumption that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1987: 101) and to Butler’s subversive bodily acts (Butler, 1990).

retrat triggered some positive memories in him, and he confessed that he actually enjoyed the discipline:

“It was a wonderful experience. You’re in a sort of monastery, which is very pure, compared with today’s materialistic world. It brought me back to the days of being a student in Africa ... Waking up early in the morning, I felt so fresh. I never felt tired like I do on a normal day. Discipline is the main thing I liked about it, and noble silence was another thing that I liked. If we don’t talk for 10 minutes [in the outside world] everybody asks...what’s wrong?” (Interview, Rob, October 2011)

Rob mentioned that, discipline, including noble silence, contrasts with the outside, modern world, giving him a new kind of freedom (not having to talk) and also more energy. According to Maxwell, the regulations were actually helpful, and his words reinforce the positive dimension of constraints and regulations:

“I enjoy the schedule once I get used to it. I don’t see these precepts as mutually exclusive of Nietzschean ideas of defining your own system of ethics or morality...actually they’re just helpful, kind of guides, you can actually think of them as ideas that eventually you could probably have yourself, althoughas far as I’m concerned I think they probably do help me personally.” (Interview, Maxwell, February 2011)

Regulations are meant to inculcate new automatisms, and the resistances they generate indicate a battle between meditative and nonmeditative habit patterns. In Zen retreats, episodes of resistance are harder to detect, since we are dealing with subtler mechanisms of subjectification, not necessarily relying on discipline (in the classical sense), but rather resembling neo-liberal forms of subject maintenance and formation. During my two stays at Plum Village, I witnessed some episodes that represented a defiance or challenge towards regulations. First, when one sits to eat, it is normal to join the palms and bow, recognizing the presence of other participants at the table, and some people refused to undertake this ritual, ignoring the fact that they were in a community of practice. Second, some people talked while practicing walking meditation, which should be conducted in silence. Third, since the use of electronic gadgets and mobile phones is allowed, there were some participants who were constantly posting on their Facebook pages and playing games (one

could argue that this is not consistent with the focus on the “here and now”). Finally, some of the ethical guidelines promoted by this practice (see chapter VIII) suggest that one should avoid consumerism; however, in each hamlet of Plum Village there is a shop selling books (mostly by Thich Nhat Hanh), chocolate and other candies, calligraphies (handwritten by Thich Nhat Hanh) and various meditative paraphernalia (such as bells). These shops open in certain occasions, and they offer the possibility to acquire all these different commodities, reinforcing the picture of commodified spirituality as previously mentioned.

These various examples suggest that regulations, understood as devices that break usual connections to suspend regular automatisms, can trigger many forms of resistance, which in turn reflect old, pre-meditative automatisms that the retreat assemblage aims at destabilizing – the modern self. The following section will analyze how retreat assemblages manage spaces to encourage meditative dispositions, thus reinforcing their role as mechanisms of transformation through the reconfiguration of habitual couplings between selves and the world.

IV. IV MEDITATIVE SPACES

ILLUSTRATION 1 - MAIN MEDITATION HALL, DHAMMA DIPA, HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND⁸⁸



ILLUSTRATION 2 - PLUM VILLAGE, DORDOGNE, FRANCE



⁸⁸ All rights belong to the Vipassana Trust, see <http://www.dipa.dhamma.org/views.html> for more images of Dhamma Dipa.

If regulations are understood as constraints that should foster new automatisms, devices such as spatial reconfiguration, the management of human and nonhuman interactions and inscriptions are also central mechanisms of subjectification in retreat spaces.

The retreat is a suspension of regular, modern life, and of its networks of subjectification. Simmel argued that the modern city has certain subjective effects, leading to the constitution of a new kind of man, the metropolitan one. This type of subject “reacts with his head instead of his heart” (Simmel, 1950:410) due to the calculative logics exerted by the “overwhelming power of the metropolitan life” (Simmel, 1950: 411), illustrating the power of cities to enact particular kinds of people (Certeau, 1984). The role of materiality in shaping subjects is highlighted by post-humanist STS (see Schull, 2005; Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1998; Pickering, 1995; Suchman, 2007; Brenninkmeijer, 2010; Verbeek, 2011), and retreats recruit spatial and institutional devices to foster the emergence of selves that are opposed to modern, nonmeditative and dual ones. Retreat assemblages rely on psychogeographical reconfigurations as a vector of subjectification. The term psychogeography was coined by Guy Debord to illustrate the subjectifying power of cities, landscapes and spatial organization in general:

“Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.” (Debord, 2006: 8)

Meditative psychogeographies rely on a diversity of devices to alter modern associations, including spatial reconfiguration, the management of interactions, inscriptions and are supported by particular understandings of space – situated spatial ontologies.

IV.IV.I SPATIAL RECONFIGURATION

If, according to Foucault (1995), the Panopticon is a laboratory of power for the fabrication of disciplined selves, Zen and Vipassana also rely on forms of spatial and architectural reconfiguration to help subjects become meditators. Meditation halls are paradigmatic spatial assemblages - lighting is scarce; decoration is kept to a minimum to avoid distractions and the habitual sounds of the city are suspended (in both cases, retreats take place in rural locations).

In Vipassana retreats, old students sit at the front, and the two ATs, male and female, are elevated (sitting on a platform), overseeing the practitioners, while male and female course managers are close to the ATs. The male AT sits on the left and the female on the right; male course managers and male servers sit on the left of the male AT, and female staff on the right of the female AT⁸⁹. If something disruptive happens, the AT, who has a wide view over the hall, will ask the course manager to take action. The way the hall is organized often means that at the back, where new students sit, it is much noisier than at the front - by the end of the retreat these differences become less noticeable.

In Plum Village, the main meditation hall of the Upper Hamlet (where my fieldwork was conducted) is called the Still Water Meditation Hall. There are two sides, right and left, and two lines of cushions. The exterior line is for visitors and lay practitioners, and the inner line is for monastics. Usually, the more senior a practitioner is the more distant he will be from the entrance of the Hall. When Thich Nhat Hanh comes to practice, he usually sits at the end of the inner line of cushions.

The different buildings and architectural devices have relatively clear goals, linked to the spatial partitioning of individuals (Foucault, 1995). In Vipassana retreats, all these buildings have particular functions, allowing regular circulations between spaces that take place according to the timetable – from the residential quarters to the meditation hall, from the meditation hall to

⁸⁹ See Pagis (2008) and Selim (2011) for good visual depictions of how the Meditation Hall is organized.

the dining room, from the dining room to the toilets, etc.. In Dhamma Dipa, an established centre of practice whose property was purchased in 1991⁹⁰, each space has a specific function – “meditation hall” to meditate, attending the evening lectures and asking questions to the AT; dining hall to have breakfast, lunch and “dinner”⁹¹, to register at the beginning of the retreat and to give Dana (donation) when it is over; residential quarters to sleep, rest and meditate; walking areas outside to walk (these include some trees and gardens, since Dhamma Dipa is in a rural area). In sum, Vipassana remind us of Goffman’s depiction of total institutions, indicating a radical shift from regular “modern” societies⁹², transforming individualities into a sort of homogeneous flock that is mobilized from one space to another, according to different scheduled activities. This allows selves to become fully engaged in the practice of meditation, and they do not have to make choices – everything is chosen for them. This means that they can concentrate their efforts in meditation: they give away their spatial freedom, their ability to move from one place to the other at their will, in order to transform their selfhood.

In Plum Village, although different buildings display different functions – sleeping, resting, eating, meditating, etc. – we don’t find the same homogeneous and relatively predictable flow of human bodies: the schedule can always be changed, there are periods for rest and self-practice and participants can stay in their rooms if they want to – meditation is not “compulsory”. This confirms the liberal or entrepreneurial approach to

⁹⁰ <http://www.dipa.dhamma.org/about.html>

⁹¹ At 5 o’clock, new students can have some tea with a piece of fruit; old students are allowed to drink lemon juice.

⁹² As put by Goffman, “a basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play and work in different places with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan... The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life.” (Goffman, 1968: 17). Goffman identifies four important mechanisms at stake here: the conduction of all aspects of life in the same place under a central authority; the fact that these activities are undertaken with a large number of others, treated as equals and required to do the same tasks; all the activities are tightly scheduled, and these are ordered by formal rulings; finally, all these activities are unified by a rational plan (Goffman, 1968:17).

meditation, where selves have to make a decision to actually practice. Moreover, and since no “shock” is involved, as in the case of Vipassana, there are various devices that display similarities with everyday life – a ping pong table is available outside to play with other retreatants and monks; a building, called the bamboo hall, has a small library with a wide range of literature (even non-religious one), there is a piano and participants can run their own workshops on yoga or tai chi if they wish to do so; in Lower Hamlet there is a swing set that is very popular, and even a basketball net. In sum, this means that different architectural devices and distinct ways of organizing space are used to support different paradigms of meditation. Vipassana isolations, regular tempos and compulsory practice contrast with Zen as an expression of the outside world.

IV.IV.II MANAGING INTERACTIONS

An important dimension of these retreats is the management of the interactions between self, environment and others. In the Vipassana retreats there is a focus on isolation, self-containment, on the individualisation of experience. First of all, numbers are attributed to participants - they are given a code that represents the place where they are sitting for the whole duration of the retreat, and this codification is linked to other information (name, room where this person is staying) that is mobilised if that individual is not present; secondly, interactions with others are forbidden – no talking, no physical contact, for 10 days the self is the only refuge; thirdly, this generalized isolation extends to sensory deprivation – meditative spaces, such as the Hall, have reduced lighting, minimal sounds and clothes should be as simple as possible to avoid distractions and there are cells (that augment sensory deprivation) that can be used by old students – basically a couple of cushions in a very small room without distractions to meditate; finally, the interaction with nonhuman living beings is reduced to a minimum – one should not meditate outside (sitting on a bench or under a tree), and there are explicit indications to avoid cuddling cats – in sum, one should reduce the interactions with human and nonhuman

entities, including the “natural world”. The politics of the Vipassana assemblage is to break all connections with the outside world, to suspend all habitual networks. Callon used the term enrolment to designate “the device by which a set of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them” (Callon, 1986: 204). Regarding the 10-day retreat, one could say that habitual networks are broken through a suspension of regular connections that afterwards enrolls new architectural, regulatory, temporal and material devices to alter human automatisms. Vipassana reduces the habitual modern network and multiplies a new set of associations that should ideally foster a new way of being.

On the other hand, in Plum Village there is a focus on community and interaction – it is common to gather with others and to sing before walking meditation; there are various other instances of sharing and talking, and there are many devices that can be used to reinforce this communitarian dimension, such as holding hands during walking meditation or practicing hugging meditation. This focus on inter-subjectivity is supported by the aesthetic experience of nature – the monastery is surrounded by vineyards and farms, it is a rural area with pine and oak trees, and fields that, during spring, are filled with thousands of beautiful daffodils – aesthetically, it is stunning. Plum Village has various hamlets, sometimes several miles apart, and one is encouraged to walk between them, becoming “exposed” to the environment, embracing “nature” while at the same time working on the self, slowing down and maximizing the experience of the present moment; these associations with the environment are not merely aesthetic, as we will see in chapter VIII, and contribute to the transformation of the meditator’s Umwelt.

We are facing two distinct logics of enrolment, of performing the network of meditation. Much has been written on modern Buddhism - according to McMahan (2008), it reflects modernity’s turn to the subject, reflexivity and aesthetics, mostly from Romanticism onwards (Taylor, 1989). One could argue that the Plum Village assemblage is a mere expression of contemporary ways of translating eastern practices, reducing them to a mere facet of modernity’s reaction to disenchantment. However, what is at stake here is the performance of a new paradigm of selfhood, involving a number of environmental and

experiential changes that should not be reduced to mere signs of modernity or disguised nostalgia. These devices actually foster new ways of experiencing the self through the alteration of habitual associations, transforming affect and reconfiguring automatisms. Selves are invited to hold each other's hands, to look at the environment, to smell the fragrance of flowers – the reconfiguration of habitual interactions is an attempt to revitalize the role of the body in connection with other humans and nonhumans and to alter the perception of the environment, bringing forth a different Umwelt as well as a whole new set of experiences (see chapter VI).

IV.IV.III INSCRIPTIONS

Vipassana and Zen assemblages are filled with spatial inscriptions, mechanisms that populate the retreat space with signs, elements that should support the practice of meditation⁹³. In Vipassana retreats, there are signs reading “Male course boundary” or “Female course boundary”, indicating the frontiers of the space of confinement, reinforcing the prohibition of leaving the established boundaries; there are other signs such as “Don’t cuddle the cats” and there is a notice board, usually on the door leading to the dining room, or inside the dining room, with some of the rules, technical aspects of the practice, the indication of the current day (day two, day three, etc) or any change to the schedule or regulations (due, for instance, to the introduction of a new

⁹³ Latour and Woolgar, in their “Laboratory Life”, used the notion of inscription devices to illustrate the transformation of matter into written documents. According to them, “An inscription device is any item of apparatus or particular configuration of such items which can transform a material substance into a figure or diagram which is directly usable by one of the members of the office space.” (Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 51). In the case of retreats, these inscriptions do not aim at transcribing material agents into words through laboratory equipments but to reinforce the psychogeography of the retreat assemblage.

meditation technique). These inscriptions function in co-operation with the work of the servers, who enforce the regulations, and with nonhumans, such as duct-tape, that signal the course boundaries when it is a non-permanent centre, requiring a set of spatial and material transformations to allow it to become a Vipassana retreat centre.

In Zen retreats, there is a relatively ubiquitous mechanism that infuses the space with the spirit of mindfulness - the physical inscription of verses, or gathas, in various places. For instance, in the dining hall there is a gatha reading “This piece of bread is an ambassador from the entire cosmos” and in the toilets we can find a gatha saying “Water flows over these hands. May I use them skilfully// to preserve our precious planet” (Hanh, 1996: 20) – these gathas are virtually everywhere and their aim is to support the mode of being promoted by this tradition through the creation of new connections. These gathas function as legislative marks or codifications, illustrating a new ontology that selves should embrace through practice. In both cases, these inscriptions aim at creating a spatial reality that entangles the legislative with the performative and the ontological, working as lieutenants (following Latour, 1988⁹⁴) of meditation – they remind participants that they are in a retreat, inviting them to adjust to new spatial, institutional and performative requirements and reinforce the clash with the outside world by populating the space with meditative inscriptions. Here, we are dealing with devices of linguistic subjectification. Butler’s example of the doctor who pronounces the gender of the child at birth (Butler, 1997a) indicates how this first announcement triggers a lifelong chain of gendered subjectification; it also reminds us of Althusser’s interpellations. According to Althusser, ideology transforms individuals into subjects through interpellations

⁹⁴ We might think that reflecting on doors, doorknobs or door closers stands in the fringes of social theory and humanities. However, a door closer was the motto of a paper by Latour (under the pseudonym of Jim Johnson) where he identified the pervasiveness of what he called lieutenants in our societies, nonhumans to which certain competencies have been delegated. Door closers justify a shift in the object of sociology (reinforcing the importance of STS): “One of the tasks of sociology is to do for the masses of nonhumans that make up our modern societies what it did so well for the masses of ordinary and despised humans that make up our society” (Latour, 1988:310).

“which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (Althusser, 2008: 48). Inscriptions, instead of directly interpellating participants (as in Althusser’s policemen), are nonhumans that populate the retreat heterotopia and that can remind practitioners of the constraints or create new webs of associations, as in the case of Zen. In both cases these new associations are positive, in the sense that they should allow the emergence of new paradigms of selfhood.

IV.IV.IV SITUATED SPATIAL ONTOLOGIES

Finally, there are aspects linked to the ontological understandings of these traditions, including notions such as “vibrations” (Vipassana) and “energies” (Zen) that are relevant in order to understand retreats. Much has been written on local and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004) and epistemological pluralism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Santos, 2006). There is also some literature on Transcendental Meditation (TM) advocating the existence of what is called the “maharishi effect” – if people practice meditation (TM, obviously), the rest of society will benefit from it (see Orme-Johnson et al., 1990; Hatchard et al., 1996; Hagelin et al., 1998) involving the assumption that selves are interconnected by a common matrix that can be accessed and modified through meditation. Notions such as “vibrations” and “energies” suspend usual dualisms between mind and matter, suggesting that not only consciousness but also space can be affected by the practice of meditation, requiring a different understanding of what the world is (see chapters V, VII and VIII).

Concerning Vipassana, one of my informants told me that S. N. Goenka came to England shortly before Dhamma Dipa was inaugurated and spent some time meditating in a tent, in exactly the same spot where the ATs nowadays sit during the retreats – the point was to generate “good vibrations” to

support the practice of meditation⁹⁵. Regarding the movement of Thich Nhat Hanh, there is a focus on the energies generated by collective practice, the energy of the Sangha. In fact, the practitioners are asked to “stop struggling” and to accept the collective flow, letting their bodies and minds being infected by this energetic power:

“Even if you don’t do anything, if you just stop thinking and allow yourself to absorb the collective energy of the Sangha, it’s very healing. Don’t struggle, don’t try to do anything, just allow yourself to be with the Sangha. Allow yourself to rest, and the energy of the Sangha will help you, will carry and support you.” (Hanh, 2002: 25)

The retreat space is not understood in a positivist sense but regarded as potentially affected by vibrations and energies that can be transformed through the practice of meditation. This means that if meditation practice is linked to the repetition of a set of technologies of the self, these favourable repetitions (Sloterdijk, 2013) can affect the environment, generating more beneficial psychogeographies for meditation, suspending the dualism between self and environment. As I argue in chapter VII, an important dimension of meditation in everyday life is the transformation of the regular Umwelt, and the long term practice of meditation can allow selves to experience time and space in novel manners, generating nonstandard experiences, confirming that these nonmodern paradigms can actually be enacted.

The role of the environment in the fabrication of meditative selves and the transformation of psychogeographies through technologies of the self suggest that there is a feedback loop between subjects and environments. According to Hayles,

“The idea of the feedback loop implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only within the subject but also between the subject and the environment.

⁹⁵For a comprehensive assessment of the role of “vibrations” for this tradition (namely its rhetorical, practical and regulatory value) see Goenka, 2002b. The informant who shared this information also told me that the sort of negative energy one encounters at the bookies illustrates how repeated emotions and performances can penetrate the temporal texture of places. See also chapter V for an exploration of Vipassana’s standpoint psychology and the importance of vibrations.

From Norbert Wiener on, the flow of information through feedback loops has been associated with the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject.” (Hayles, 1999: 2)

These couplings between humans and the environment justify the relevance of the setting as a device of subjectification, submitting humans to new networks, constraints and couplings with nonhumans, suspending the habitual connections of the outside world. The setting is a post-humanist space (Pickering, 1995), relying on a diversity of devices that displace and reinvent subjectivities:

“a space in which the human actors are still there but now inextricably entangled with the nonhuman, no longer at the center of the action and calling the shots. The world makes us in one and the same process as we make the world.” (Pickering, 1995: 26)

Meditation teachers such as Goenka and Hanh recognize this phenomenon, which means that Vipassana and Zen retreats explicitly alter webs of associations to allow the emergence of nonmodern selves. A relevant dimension of these retreats concerns the introduction of new material agents, as I argue in the following section.

IV.V MATERIALITIES

An essential aspect of these retreats is the introduction of nonhuman devices that can transform and adapt human behaviour. These materials, following Latour and ANT, can be understood as actants, entities that modify “another entity in a trial; of actors it can only be said that they act; their competence is deducted from their performances” (Latour, 2004b: 237).

Our lives are characterized by a proliferation of nonhuman devices such as TV’s, computers and mobile phones, constantly interacting with us and shaping our selves. How should we characterize the technological or material networks of meditation retreats, the set of nonhuman elements that should

ideally sustain, maximize and support meditation? First, if people are going to practice sitting meditation, they have to sit. In the Vipassana retreats, there is a “standard operating procedure” for those who sit for the first time. There is a large, thin quadrangular cushion that rests on the floor, and then there is a smaller, thicker cushion on top of that. It is possible to add another small cushion to the set, to elevate the body, easing the process of sitting cross legged or in the lotus or semi-lotus position. In Plum Village, each person can use one of various Zafu cushions available there; these also rest on top of a larger quadrangular cushion that protects the legs from the contact with the hard, wooden floor.

The adaptation to a new material network generates resistances. Sitting for long periods of time is not easy for beginners, and in chapter VI I explore some of the most common difficulties (including pain) that take place, understood as struggles of agency. Robert Hover, who learned meditation with U Ba Khin in Burma (Goenka’s teacher) recalled his first experience with the cushions in the following way:

“I was a five-pillow man”. Hover described. “One under my seat, one under each knee, one behind my back against the wall, and one that I brought along”, and he waved his hand in the air shaking an imaginary pillow that you could practically see, “just in case.” He demonstrated his initial sitting posture: slumped shoulders, knees jutting up in the air, and an expression of naive bewilderment on his face.” (Lerner, 1977: 61)

Judith Toy, a Zen practitioner, started using a bench, after many years of meditation, to be able to sit for long periods of time. She even sewed a thin cushion for the top of the bench, reinforcing the importance of nonhumans to the practice of meditation: “the bench became for me a happy middle way between cushion and chair, a benchmark. I sewed a cushion for the top of the bench, covering it in black cotton. I discovered I was able to sit relaxed.” (Toy, 2011: 115-116)

There are many other actants that are part of networks of meditation. In the Vipassana retreats, the course manager carries with him a document with the name of each student, the place where he sits and his room number, in order to trace him if he is not following the schedule; in Plum Village, and during

the mindfulness days, we can find ancestors' shrines, containing pictures of (usually dead) relatives. Architectural devices, environments, spatial partitioning and nonhumans create new webs of associations that alter how people use their bodies and interact with others, contributing towards the transformation of automatisms. There are two relevant sets of nonhumans that reinforce the role of materiality in reconfiguring habitual associations: Audio and Video tapes (in Vipassana retreats) and bells (Zen).

IV.V.I AUDIO AND VIDEO TAPES

In Vipassana retreats, instructions are given through audio and video tapes. These nonhumans “suspend” sensory deprivation – it is through technology that one receives information on how to meditate and how to interpret one’s experiences. The same tapes are played everywhere in the Western world, supporting the quasi-universal character of this practice. These materials are standardized forms that can be understood as immutable mobiles⁹⁶ (Latour, 1987), those actants that “remain stable enough to retain their shape or configuration as they circulate through and across networks.” (Gershon, 2010: 168). Instead of being texts, maps or diagrams, these actants are audio and video devices that resist spatial and temporal impermanence, assuring that in every retreat the same instructions and explanations are given. Few Vipassana meditators have met Goenka in person, but they all have seen his digital image and heard the low, guttural and slow paced voice that is constantly telling them what to do. Goenka may die, but these tapes will survive him for many years. Vipassana is a technology of the electronic era - the dissemination of these tapes is a form of governing at a distance (Foucault, 2007) – the guru becomes virtual and anthropotechnics are globalized through the power of Ipods, CD players and TV sets.

⁹⁶ According to Latour, immutable and combined mobiles are “All these charts, tables and trajectories [that] are conveniently at hand and combinable at will, no matter whether they are twenty centuries old or a day old; each of them brings celestial bodies billions of tons heavy and hundreds of thousands of miles away to the size of a point on a piece of paper.”(Latour, 1987: 227)

These tapes are played every night between 7 and 8:15 PM, and they cover the following aspects: general difficulties and experiences in a specific stage of the retreat, according to the technique being “followed”; ontological aspects of matter and of the self, such as the nature of the mind and body; central aspects of Buddhist philosophy, such as the four noble truths or the law of kamma; narratives of the life of the Buddha and historical aspects of Vipassana, etc.. These discourses are adapted to each day, following a step-by-step process. For instance, in day one the discourse covers topics such as the initial difficulties, the purpose of meditation, why respiration is chosen as the starting point, the nature of the mind, how to deal with difficulties and the dangers to be avoided (Goenka, 1987: 7). In day four, the discourse focuses on “Questions on how to practice Vipassana – the law of kamma – importance of mental action – four aggregates of the mind” (Goenka, 1987: 7)⁹⁷.

Bearing in mind Becker’s remarks on marijuana, we can understand these tapes as a form of “folklore,” allowing practitioners to justify their presence in the retreat – “In the course of further experience in drug-using groups, the novice acquires a series of rationalizations and justifications with which he may answer objections to occasional use if he decides to engage in it” (Becker, 1963: 74). In sum, these tapes help participants make sense of their experiences.

The role of ATs is to press play, allowing the tapes to display the image of S. N. Goenka, always accompanied by his wife. This confirms his status of a “householder” like those in attendance, suggesting that they don’t belong to different social strata. The videos are in English, and those who do not speak

⁹⁷ The role of these tapes is to reshape subjectivities, providing “responses” to existential conditions - why we suffer, why our mind reacts in certain ways, why we are attached to sensations, etc. - participants are given detailed and comprehensive explanations concerning the methodology they are applying, and how such technique alters their physical and mental apparatus; they become part of a community of meditative experience, being presented with an array of experiences and difficulties that occur; they learn that there is a doctrine, a philosophical structure underlying the practice - what they are practicing is Dhamma - they are given concepts, narratives, explanations and tools to interpret the experience of the self according to that background. In chapter V I will use the notion of “standpoint psychology” to characterize this hermeneutical assemblage, understood as essentially performative.

the language can use a headset with the discourses in another language⁹⁸. These tapes are used to create the “retreat effect” in the absence of the teacher. All instructions are given by audio tapes, played at the beginning of each hour, involving Goenka chanting in Pali⁹⁹, and without these tapes there could be no Vipassana retreats - they allow Goenka to fabricate brand new meditators at a distance.

IV.V.II BELLS OF MINDFULNESS

In Zen retreats, bells are actants with a quasi-ubiquitous status. They are constantly used to announce the beginning of an activity (eating, walking, sitting meditation) and practitioners are encouraged to stop whatever they are doing and to focus on their breathing. Ideally, this is done for three breaths. As Hanh states: “When we hear the sound of the bell, we stop talking and stop moving. We relax our body and become aware of our breathing. We do it naturally, with enjoyment, and without solemnity or stiffness.” (Hanh, 2009: 20). Bells, following ANT, are mediators, they translate a program of action (Akrich and Latour, 1992). As Verbeek explains,

“When a technology mediates, it involves the “translation” of a “program of action.” Say a person (actant 1) is angry and wants to take revenge on someone, but is not strong enough to do that person physical harm. His “program of action” - the “intention” to take revenge— is blocked. This person, however, can take on a relation with a gun (actant 2). This gun mediates the program of action of actant 1, on the basis of its own program of action - the “function” of shooting. A new actant arises (actant 1 + actant 2), with a new, translated program: the killing of the person against whom one wants to take revenge... The original program of action is thus “translated” or “transformed” in the technical mediation into a new one.” (Verbeek, 2005: 156)

⁹⁸ When I was attending the retreat in Portugal, they were playing a video dubbed in Portuguese in the meditation hall; in the dining room, they had the videos in English and I also heard a German translation when the discourse in English came to an end.

⁹⁹ For a good reflection on the importance of chanting in Pali during meditation retreats, see Cook (2010).

The program of action of Zen retreat assemblages is to enact mindfulness, awareness of the present moment. However, participants are still dealing with their automatisms - they are distracted, they think about home, the past or the future, even when they are totally surrounded by a radically different environment. In order to materialize mindfulness, a new device, the bell, is used to help participants come back to the present moment. This nonhuman is not easily enrolled – human participants are struggling with the assemblage, and they find it hard to implement a new mode of existence. As Brad told me, the bell can actually have an unintended effect, linked to the expectation that a meditation session will end:

“People can be bored, or impatient, and can just wait for the bell to ring, and then...what happens when the bell rings? They certainly feel relieved, or something, you know, I have that sometimes, I sit down like...buhhhh...I’m waiting for this bell to ring!” (Interview, Brad, February 2011).

The use of bells seems counterproductive; if meditation should allow the development of awareness through the installation of new, meditative automatisms, the bell seems to lead to new conditionings (Pavlov, 1955; Watson and Rayner, 1920) that make the practice of meditation even harder. In order to be able to *enjoy* the bell, one has to practice: in sum, the bell can only serve the program of action of the retreat assemblage if those who hear it practice how to listen to the bell, transforming their automatisms and linking its sound to mindfulness, instead of projecting into the bell some particular expectation (dealing with food, rest, sleep, etc.).

If, according to Latour, there is no discipline without steel (1991b), there can be no Zen retreats without bells. I remember that in one occasion, in the Spring of 2012, I was in charge of inviting the bell during a day of mindfulness in Devon, to remind people to return to the meditation hall after a period of self-practice. It took me slightly longer than expected to call everyone (I had to invite the bell for several times, since people were all over the property) and when I returned to the meditation hall I realized that the retreat organizers were quite worried because they had no bell to announce the following activity.

There are various techniques and procedures to invite the bell, depending on the circumstances. It can be used during ordination ceremonies to produce entrancing melodies, to announce a new scheduled activity or just to make sure that everyone is practicing mindfulness¹⁰⁰. Instead of striking, one invites the bell. Jane, a long-term practitioner who facilitates weekly meetings, told me that she needs a clear heart in order to invite its sound:

“I send my heart with the sound of the bell... you know, there’s different gathas about sending the...heart...well-being to the world, so that’s great, actually it’s very good for heart connection, connecting my heart and trying to have a clear space, and a clear heart. In order to invite the bell, I need a clear heart ..., so you’re doing it with a clarity...and a peaceful mind.” (Interview, Jane, April 2011)

Inviting the bell requires the development of a particular state of mind. This means that in order to *activate* the bell, one should transform habitual automatisms. The bell and the practitioner are coupled to produce the sound that should ideally allow others to attain a different mindset: they should be able to listen, breathing for three times and staying in the present moment.

Bells, video tapes and cushions can be understood as mediators (as put in chapter II), they support the practice of meditation, inviting human actors to alter their posture, affect and how they make sense of what is happening. These nonhumans are devices of material subjectification. Audio and Video tapes give instructions and provide hermeneutical explanations – Goenka becomes a digital guru; cushions are carefully used to permit the emergence of the sitting posture, clashing with the habitual automatisms of participants; bells are mediators of mindfulness – they allow the transition from one activity to another and require participants to engage in new performances.

These different materials permit the emergence of the retreat assemblage. They alter and mediate human actions, requiring humans to adapt their automatisms and to rely on new material apparatuses to practice

¹⁰⁰ For an excellent introduction and explanation of the importance of the Bell, given by Sister Dang Nhiem, watch this great video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6aYE3irqFQ> (Retrieved: 12/09/2013). The big bell in the Meditation Hall sits on a cushion, just like a human being.

meditation. Through these new couplings with materials, practitioners are able to attain different dispositions, including the range of affordances analyzed in chapters VI and VII.

IV.VI CONCLUSION

We can think of Vipassana and Zen retreats as heterogeneous assemblages composed of a variety of dispositifs: ways of entering the retreat space; constraints; spatial reconfiguration and nonhumans. The hybrid nature of spaces of meditation (comprising human and nonhuman agents) allows us to question humanist understandings of meditation (McMahan, 2008). In practice, meditation retreats are not the mere result of ideas, historical processes or social trends – they include the soft fabric of cushions, the cold metal of bells, the wooden floors of meditation halls, human bodies that move according to timetables and delicious vegetarian food.

These new webs of association constitute new environments that contrast with the modern assemblages participants are used to. New meditators have a hard time adjusting to the new setting (see chapter VI) – they are not only learning new technologies of the self; they are also engaging in new networks, new couplings with material, architectural and regulatory devices that challenge their habitual ways of being in the world.

Retreat assemblages emerge along with these heterogenous devices. In order to reproduce these assemblages, the network of associations constituting the retreat has to be reproduced. For instance, the one-day Vipassana courses, available to old students, are spent in silence; there are special tapes with instructions; cushions are available and a timetable regulates the various activities undertaken¹⁰¹. The mindfulness days of the Zen tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh also attempt to reproduce the “retreat effect”. They are comprised of a set of actants such as pictures of relatives that constitute the

¹⁰¹ 08.50 - Arrive and settle in; 9.00 - 10.50 Anapana; 11.00 - 12.00 Vipassana; 12.00 - 1.00 Lunch and rest; 1.00 - 1.50 Meditation; 2.00 - 3.00 Group Sitting; 3.10 - 4.00 Meditation and Metta; 4.10 - 4.35 Discourse; 4.35 - Course ends and Tea. This is the timetable of a one-day course I attended in 2012.

ancestors' shrine; chanting books (Hanh, 2007b) and the array of practices and performances linked to this tradition¹⁰². Likewise, social applications of meditation also rely on these nonmodern webs of associations, as we will see in chapter VIII.

Retreat assemblages destabilize the modern self through the suspension of habitual associations (including those prompted by writing, speaking, or watching TV), relying on regulations, architectural agents and a variety of mediators. They set up new connections to allow selves to transform their automatisms, including their sleep, the way they eat or their habitual postures. Retreats, understood as “other places”, as heterotopias, invite participants to embrace a new environment, to be affected by new associations and to transform themselves.

Another relevant element in the constitution of new paradigms of subjectivity is the transformation of human performances. The role of techniques of meditation is to foster new possibilities of existence by changing what people do with their selves, and the aim of the following chapter is to

¹⁰² I attended three days of mindfulness in Devon; The timetable was never the same, and the focus was on practicing together – eating, walking, meditating and undertaking other central performances of this project of subjectivity. However, the timetable of a mindfulness day can be something like this: “9:45 to 10:00 AM--Please Arrive and find a seat. Shoes may be left on the inside stairway as entering. Bring slippers if you like, a cushion to sit on, a mat for warmth and a blanket for deep relaxation. A light vegetarian food item, to go with a homemade, organic, vegetarian soup, is optional. Utensils, plates, cups, napkins, and tea are provided.; 10:00 AM—Welcome, Introductions, preview of morning schedule. Guided Meditation (10 Minutes) Walking Meditation (20 minutes) Sitting Meditation (30 minutes) 11:15 AM--10 Minute silent break for tea and bathroom. 11:25--DVD of one of Thay's Dharma Talks as we co-practice with Plum Village winter retreat. 11:45--Dharma Discussion: Your experience, especially as it relates to the Dharma Presentation. 12:15—Lunch, a small bell will sound after a 5 minutes to enjoy quiet conversation.(20 minutes) 12:35--Sitting Meditation (20 minutes) 12:55--Walking Meditation, or mindful movement stretching. (10 minutes) 1:05—Deep Relaxation—Bring a blanket please. (25 minutes) 1:30—Discourse on Love (Chanting from the Heart p. 351) Enjoy singing songs of practice. 1:50--- Sharing the Merit, Closure and Cleanup 2:00—Enjoy the rest of your day. Be kind.” This timetable was obtained from the website of the Five Stones Sangha in Oregon - <https://sites.google.com/site/fivestonessanghacorvallis/Home/News/mindfulnessdaythissaturdayjan11th> (Retrieved: 15/06/2012)

explore the various technologies of the self taught in Vipassana and Zen retreats.

V. PERFORMANCES

“When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom.

Then you will teach him again to dance wrong side out
as in the frenzy of dance halls
and this wrong side out will be his real place.”

(Artaud, 1976: 572)

“Habit ... concerns not only the sensory-motor habits that we have [psychologically], but also, before these, the primary habits that we are; the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed. It is simultaneously through contraction that we are habits, but through contemplation that we contract. We are contemplations, we are imaginations, we are generalities, claims and satisfactions.”

(Deleuze, 1994: 74)

V.I INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I suggested that retreat settings reconfigure habitual webs of associations, allowing selves to enter new assemblages that foster nonmodern ways of being. The establishment of new settings, as devices of subjectification, is accompanied by the introduction of technologies of the self that clash with habitual ways of enacting subjectivity in everyday life, inviting practitioners to install new automatisms.

One could argue that man is a creature of habit. We deploy a multiplicity of performances to get on with our daily lives, repeating automatisms that

illustrate patterns of reaction towards physical sensations and emotions (such as being disgusted by extreme pain or rejoicing with an orgasm). These are so deeply embodied in ourselves that we tend to naturalize them; moreover, in social theory, notions such as imitation, *habitus* or habits have been deployed to illustrate the couplings between self and social (Tarde, 1903; Mead, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977), suggesting that a relevant dimension of belonging to a particular social world is the ability to incorporate, repeat and maintain these regular automatisms.

If the role of the retreat is to conjure up nonmodern settings, practices of meditation implement new automatisms that sustain nonmodern subjectivities. Sloterdijk provides a brilliant summary of how technologies of the self aim at transforming the totality of the individual through favourable repetitions (of technologies of the self or anthropotechnics):

“No part of the human can stay as it was: the feelings are reformed, the habitus remodelled, the world of thoughts restructured from the bottom up, and the spoken word overhauled. The whole of life rises up as a new construction on the foundation of favourable repetition.” (Sloterdijk, 2013: 405)

We have seen, in the literature review (chapter II), that the management of human performance is an essential part of creating, sustaining and altering subjectivities. In the case of meditation, the reshaping of human performance is linked to the attempt to transform habitual automatisms, installing new ways of performing human existence, ideally enacting nonmodern forms of selfhood.

Instead of developing a humanist approach to these practices¹⁰³, I suggest that performances¹⁰⁴ of meditation contrast with habitual, modern ways

¹⁰³ For instance, Durkheim developed a secular and social analysis of ritual life, suggesting that the sacred is a force generated by social assembling (Durkheim, 1995). The main problem of this humanist perspective is that it suggests that the “sacred” is just a projection of particular social configurations, the coming together of social actors. In order to generate new realms of experience and reality, these actors have, in fact, to associate themselves with nonhumans (as I suggested in the previous chapter), altering habitual webs of associations, and they have to engage in a series of technologies that reshape their habitual automatisms.

of being in the world, opening up new possibilities of agency and of experiencing the environment, transforming one's Umwelt – through the alteration of couplings between humans and technologies of the self, they allow the emergence of new affordances. Unlike Durkheim, I do not understand these practices as “rituals”, but as technologies that permit the emergence of new realms of reality, involving entanglements between humans, nonhumans, technologies and a number of other devices.

Technologies of meditation require practitioners to do different things with their bodies and minds, involving particular ways of eating, sitting, walking, paying attention to sensations throughout the body or becoming aware of their breath. Zen and Vipassana technologies invite practitioners to become aware of these deep rooted automatisms and to develop new ones.

Zen and Vipassana resort to a variety of practices to alter human automatisms and to enact nonmodern paradigms of selfhood. Vipassana relies on the deployment of three technologies of the self - Anapanasati (awareness of the breath); Vipassana (insight [into the nature of reality] meditation, or “seeing things as they really are”¹⁰⁵) and Metta (loving kindness meditation). These three different performances aim at transforming human automatisms, undertaking specific operations such as calming the mind, becoming aware of one's body or radiating positive feelings. Regarding the set of practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh, we also find well-structured forms of

¹⁰⁴ Although Tambiah argued in favour of a performative approach to ritual, he still defines it as “a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication” (Tambiah, 1985: 128), and the performativity he advocates is Austinian (Austin, 1970) and merely linguistic, in the sense of perlocutionary acts (where saying something means doing something), with links to Butler's performativity (influenced by Althusserian interpellations). Although language and words can be mobilized to achieve some effects, I will try to avoid these culturalist and humanist approaches to practice, illustrating the rule of the so-called “linguistic turn” that, according to Verbeek: “turns things into little more than projection screens for our interpretations, reduces them to the words with which we describe them, and fails to give them their due, their proper weight.” (Verbeek, 2005: 1-2)

¹⁰⁵ This definition is widely used by this movement. See <http://www.dhamma.org/en/code.shtml> (Retrieved: 13/09/2013). See also chapter I.

performative self-transformation: although these are also supported by particular techniques, the point is to maintain the same mental attitude (mindfulness) throughout everyday life activities. In both projects, humans have to develop new gestures, body postures, forms of dealing with their inner worlds and new associations to re-pattern selfhood, and these techniques are supported by particular understandings of what people are, what in this chapter I will call standpoint psychologies.

This chapter is comprised of three main sections. In the first section, I will explore how Vipassana transforms human automatisms and how this process of transformation is coupled with particular ways of conceiving humans. I will also reflect on two important aspects to understand Vipassana assemblages: its claims of scientificity and the focus on purity. In the second section, I present the wide range of techniques promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh and I reflect on the performative continuity fostered by this tradition, as well as on the collective nature of these practices, coupled with nondual understandings of the self. In the third section, “The Performativity of Anthropotechnics”, and influenced by STS (see chapter II), I suggest that we should understand technologies of the self as performative, in the sense that they attempt to bring forth paradigms of selfhood and certain phenomena whose emergence is entangled with the activation of Zen and Vipassana assemblages.

V.II VIPASSANA

Vipassana retreats introduce participants to three technologies: Anapanasati, Vipassana and Metta. These comprise distinct performative transformations, embedded in disciplinary environments that also manage activities such as sleeping, eating, or speaking (see chapter IV).

V.II.I ANAPANASATI

The first meditative technique is called Anapanasati (sometimes referred to as Anapana), awareness of the breath, and it is practiced for three days. This new technology, as all the others in these retreats, requires participants to sit in a comfortable position, with a straight spine and closed eyes, in the lotus or half lotus position or the kneeling posture. Most of the meditators use the cross-legged position, and some of them (mostly older ones) may use a chair or even sit against the wall, although this requires permission by the AT. One has to find the most comfortable position by oneself, since there is no physical contact during the course, and there is no one in charge of correcting students' postures. As we have seen in the previous chapter, one can go through many problems while adjusting to the cushion, and most participants experience pain (see chapter VI).

Initially, the meditator should feel the various sensations created by the touch of the breath inside, at the entrance or below the nostrils, inspiring and expiring. One should not control the breath or count it; however, if the mind is agitated, then a few deep breaths are advised to help fixing the attention (Hart, 1987: 75). After those deep breaths, meditators should breathe normally, observing (feeling) the sensations caused by the stream of air touching the area of the nostrils, without controlling it. If the practitioner is not able to maintain the awareness of the breath continuously for approximately 5 minutes then he/she can try to breathe deeply for a while, to increase concentration.

This technique requires individuals to direct their attention towards the breath, an automatism they usually do not pay attention to, altering what Csordas calls somatic modes of attention, "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas: 1999: 152), highlighting the impacts of pre-reflective visceral feeling (Shaw, 2004 and 2010) on affect. The goal is the development of concentration by focusing on a single object, thus fighting the

“monkey mind”¹⁰⁶ that characterizes non-meditative selves, constantly wandering to the past and to the future, unable to be present¹⁰⁷. Most of us frequently experience Task-Unrelated-Thoughts (TUT), “thought directed away from the current situation; for example, a day dream” (Smallwood et al., 2003: 169). TUT is a dominant characteristic of modern selves, meaning that while we are doing something (such as eating, walking or listening to someone speaking) we are often thinking of something else (sex, sleeping or some article we have to submit). According to Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010), 46.9 % of the 5000 people of 83 countries they studied reported mind wandering, and it occurred in approximately 30% of the subjects during every activity except love making (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010: 932).

The habit of the human mind is to escape from the present moment, and Anapanasati, as a practice of concentration, aims at transforming the regular automatism of not being aware of the here and now – by attempting to focus on the breath, this technology also prepares subjects to practice Vipassana. Since these retreats are organized in a progressive fashion, with the continuous introduction of new techniques and variations, Anapanasati is also constantly changing.

This first variation prepares the meditator to feel sensations in various parts of the body. One has to maintain the focus of concentration on the triangular area below the nostrils and above the upper lip¹⁰⁸. Participants are told to observe different sensations, feeling (without noting¹⁰⁹) whatever arises in that area. As Glickman puts it, reproducing Goenka’s instructions, “You may feel itchy, you may feel trembling, you may feel warmth, cold, perspiration,

¹⁰⁶ According to Goenka: “Like a monkey, this monkey-mind keeps jumping from one branch of a tree to another. As soon as it leaves one branch, it holds another. It is so agitated, so disturbed, so miserable.” (Goenka, 2002a:82)

¹⁰⁷ See Hart (1987:75) for a comprehensive explanation of why it is important to develop awareness of respiration.

¹⁰⁸ Old students are asked to start practicing like this from the very beginning of the retreat.

¹⁰⁹ Other popular techniques of Vipassana, such as the one disseminated by Mahasi Sayadaw, focus on mental noting, permanently labelling phenomenological experience (Kornfield, 2010).

breeze, pain, palpitation, juggling, wiggling, pulsating or any combination of these” (Glickman, 2002: 89). If it is difficult to feel sensations this way, meditators can hold their breath for half a minute, noticing the emerging sensations.

To strengthen this process, there is another variation of the technique. One is asked to limit the attention to a spot the size of a fingertip, between the nostrils and the upper lip, with an attitude of non reactive observation towards sensations. The goal is to sharpen the mind to the point that it is able to feel sensations on a very limited area, increasing bodily awareness.

V.II.II THE TECHNIQUE OF VIPASSANA

On the fourth day, Vipassana is taught, and the technique consists of scanning the body from head to toes, feeling sensations. One has to start from the top of the head, feeling every part of the body - the scalp, the head, the neck, the throat, the arms, the chest and stomach, the back, the legs – it is important that every part of the body at the surface level is scanned. After some days, one scans the body not only from head to toes but from the tip of the toes to the top of the head. Ideally, and depending on the awareness (the ability to focus the mind on body parts), the area to be scanned should be a few inches wide, but bigger parts can be observed. When Vipassana is introduced, it marks the beginning of the *Adhitanna* sittings, or sittings of strong determination. One is not supposed to move for one hour, the length of each meditation session. Although small postural corrections (such as straightening the spine) are allowed, to maintain a correct posture, no scratching, opening the eyes or changing the hand position is permitted.

A relevant dimension of our lives deals with the ability to react to whatever we are experiencing. If we feel itchy, we will scratch that part of the body; when we are working, if the back is sore after sitting for several hours we try to do some stretching, shift posture or get a new chair. We usually pay some attention to the body and react according to its signals – pain, cold, soreness, etc.. The aim of Vipassana is to alter this automatism of reaction, replacing

habitual somatic modes of attention, and the Adhitanna sittings reinforce this training in stillness, inviting practitioners to detach themselves from sensuous experience.

Different sensations appear during this process, including gross ones (heat, cold, perspiration, itching, tingling, pain, aching, etc.) as well as those sensations usually called “subtle”. Goenka explicitly differentiates between these two types of sensations in order to allow participants to refine their awareness towards them and to ease the transition to a new anthropotechnical regime.

According to my experience and the numerous accounts of meditators, these subtle sensations are felt as a kind of warm vibration – there is a strong awareness of the part being scanned, sensed as an intermittent dance of small particles, as if this specific part of the surface of the body was deprived from solidity, constantly radiating a vibrating warmth. While scanning, one is observing (or feeling) sensations – if participants are unable to feel something, they are instructed to pay attention to that part for approximately one minute. After feeling a sensation, the scanning can continue.

The Vipassana technique installs new automatisms – selves become aware of their bodies ideally in a nonreactive way, and if they encounter subtle sensations, they can sweep their body from head to toes rapidly. They train themselves to become aware of a new type of body, a nonmodern body filled with subtle sensations that can be increasingly felt as the practice is refined – the subtle body of Vipassana meditation¹¹⁰, reinforcing its nonmodern character¹¹¹.

¹¹⁰ The notion of “subtle body” is also common in other traditions, including Yoga. According to Johnston and Barcan, “Subtle body is a term used to describe a model of embodied subjectivity in which matter and consciousness are not understood as ontologically distinct but as varieties of ‘energy’ resonating at different densities.” (Johnston and Barcan, 2006: 25).

¹¹¹ The notion of “vibrations” is usually linked to a nonmodern ontology of the self. According to Henriques (2010: 58) “Modelling the transmission of affect on the propagation of vibrations is intended to aid and abet the radical potential of the concept of affect to literally shake up traditional psychology’s solid object of the ‘subject’. This individual has three key characteristics: selfconsistency,

The practice of Vipassana is linked to particular ways of understanding human beings. As the following section suggests, Vipassana portrays humans as essentially reactive, enslaved by their habitual automatisms, and the aim of the technology of the self is to allow practitioners to overcome this “condition”.

V.II.III VIPASSANA’S THEORY OF THE SELF

In the previous chapter, the theory of the self supporting the practice of Vipassana was understood as belonging to the “folklore” (Becker, 1963) of this assemblage, a set of ideas and assumptions that help users justify their practice, constituting a standpoint psychology¹¹² - a situated perspective on the nature of the human mind. There are many paradigms that aim at explaining the human condition, what people are – psychoanalysis, transpersonal psychology, existentialism, behaviourism, as well as a variety of non-western perspectives. Usually, these models of the self (especially in psychological, religious and contemplative contexts) prescribe particular ways of allowing humans to attain certain conditions, including dealing with their traumas, expanding the human potential, achieving self-realization or mystical union with God.

In the case of Vipassana, we are dealing with a simplification of Buddhist psychology (see Goleman, 1981; Kalupahana, 1987; Silva, 2000), highly influenced by the work of Ledi Sayadaw, who was responsible for reviving the tradition in Burma through the help of classic Buddhist texts (see Sayadaw, 1999). The standpoint psychology deployed by Vipassana assemblages presents humans as highly reactive beings, trapped by their preconceptions about the nature of the world and the self.

According to this tradition, and following Buddhist psychology (and its scheme of the five aggregates), when the mind receives an input, a sensation

autonomy and rationality.” The journal “The Senses and Society” dedicated a special issue to Vibratory Movement (Volume 3, Number 2, July 2008).

¹¹² Here, I am influenced by Sandra Harding’s notion of “standpoint epistemologies” (2004).

(or *vedana*) arises (Hart, 1987). If there is no evaluation of such input, the sensation is neutral, but if it is assessed it becomes pleasant or unpleasant. We now enter the realm of reaction, *sankhara*, highly important to Vipassana. According to Smart, we should understand *sankharas* as dispositions, “those short or long-term states of the individual disposing or inclining him to act in a certain way, and those karmic activities and dispositions which carry over from one life to another” (Smart, 1984: 373). These *sankharas* are automatisms, habitual ways of reacting towards phenomena. According to Goenka, there seems to be a general pattern characterizing human automatisms - when people feel a sensation they react with craving or aversion. If it is pleasant, humans desire the continuation of the experience – generating craving - , if it is painful or unwanted, aversion is developed:

“When the ear is functioning normally and one hears a sound, cognition is at work. When the sound is recognized as words, with positive or negative connotations, perception has started to function. Next sensation comes into play. If the words are praise, a pleasant sensation arises. If they are abuse, an unpleasant sensation arises. At once reaction takes place. If the sensation is pleasant, one starts liking it, wanting more words of praise. If the sensation is unpleasant, one starts disliking it, wanting to stop the abuse.” (Hart, 1987:27)¹¹³

How should we understand this “map” of the mind, this explanation of consciousness and its functions? It is a mere construction, a “native” belief shared by Goenka and some of his followers? According to Latour (1999), there is a canonical dualism between fact and fetish, real and constructed. Goenka’s translation of Buddhist psychology (including the five aggregates) could initially lead us to suggest that there is a dualism between the experience of consciousness (fact) and the standpoint psychology of Vipassana and its mental map (a belief/ fetish). Latour suggests that construction and autonomous reality are, in fact, synonyms (Latour, 1999: 275), therefore the dualism between fact and fetish should be replaced by the term factish, dealing with those “types of action that do not fall into the comminatory choice between fact and belief” (Latour, 1999: 306).

¹¹³ See Hart (1987: 91) for a thorough explanation of how Vipassana can counter this particular condition.

The explanation of mental processes by Vipassana can be understood as a factish that is mobilized to justify a whole set of performances of meditation that aim at breaking a particular automatism that characterizes the human condition – reactivity. In fact, the automatism of craving for a pleasant sensation or avoiding unpleasant ones supposedly causes suffering, because reality does not correspond to human desire. Reactions occur because the mind is unable to deal with sensations in a detached manner. Humans want to perpetuate a blissful experience or to avoid a negative one, and this phenomenon perpetuates the flow of consciousness due to the generation of new *sankharas* - they *feed* the mind (Goenka, 1987: 48).

The *sankharas* are considered the fuel of the mind - by reacting with craving or aversion, new *sankharas* are generated and accumulate – the multiplication of dispositions reinforce the continuous automatism of reacting towards positive/negative sensations. Vipassana is performed against this picture of reactivity, becoming a technique for the “purification” of the individual – through meditation, the generation of new *sankharas* should be stopped in order to “purify” the mind and the self; the installation of a new automatism should allow practitioners to suspend everyday ways of being, breaking the attachment to sensuous experience through a particular way of observing sensations. Meditation is mobilized to overcome a particular condition of the self, linked to automatisms, understood as subsidiaries of the craving/aversion dynamic and linked to a standpoint psychology. In order to overcome the reactive paradigm of the self, a particular gaze – using Csordas’ terms, a somatic mode of attention - called equanimity, needs to be developed.

V.II. IV THE GAZE OF EQUANIMITY

The technique of Vipassana requires moving one’s attention throughout the body, part by part, piece by piece (as Goenka states during the retreats) with a specific gaze called equanimity, observing sensations without reacting to them – “One is aware of all that one experiences, of every sensation, but does

not react, does not tie new knots of craving or aversion, does not create misery for oneself.” (Goenka, 1987: 22)

Foucault suggested that the development of clinical medicine (and human sciences in general, particularly from the 19th century onwards) relied on the constitution of the clinical gaze that objectified humans:

“The great myth of the free gaze, which, in its fidelity to discovery receives the virtue to destroy; a purified purifying gaze; which freed from darkness, dissipates darkness. The cosmological values implicit in the *Aufklärung* are still at work here. The medical gaze ... was only one segment of the dialectic of the *Lumières* transported into the doctor's eye.” (Foucault, 2003: 62)

Vipassana, as a technology of subjective transformation, relies on the power of the equanimous gaze to install a new way of dealing with reality - while one is scanning the body one has to try not to crave for sensations, whether positive or negative. One has to remain alert, attentive to the present sensorial reality¹¹⁴. The focus on the present physical reality is meant to *break* the normal performative order of the individual, craving for pleasure and avoiding pain. By being equanimous towards experiences, meditation transforms habitual automatisms and becomes part of a broader project of subjectivity, allowing the unveiling of nonmodern experiences (Chapter VI), new ways of behaving in daily life (Chapter VII) and of reinventing social institutions (Chapter VIII). In sum, observing sensations without reacting, with the eyes closed and in silence is the touchstone of new, nonmodern ontologies.

But what exactly is the object of equanimity? One is being equanimous towards the plethora of physical sensations that emerge within the framework of the body, with the understanding of *anicca* or impermanence. A gross sensation is experienced, and one just feels. A pleasant sensation occurs, and one just feels. No reaction, no craving for good sensations or blissful experiences, no rejection of unpleasant ones. Whatever is happening will pass, because reality is impermanent - *anicca*. When one meditates, one strives to maintain the

¹¹⁴ This is why there is no *pranayama* (Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971) involved, with Apanana it is the natural breath, no performative modulation of the breath is required.

awareness of *anicca*, not creating attachment to sensations (Goenka, 2002a: 103). This resembles forms of suspended animation, such as those conferred by anaesthesia, a technique for “expanding one’s passivity competence” (Sloterdijk, 2013: 382). However, equanimity is not enacted by chemical substances but by rigorous spiritual performances that eventually break the attachment to *whatever* is happening, ideally erecting the figure of the inner statue (Sloterdijk, 2013), the subject unaffected by the theatre of consciousness and by bodily sensations, remaining stable in face of everything. Eventually, through this stillness, nonmodern experiences can take place, enacting body and mind in radically different ways.

According to U Ba Khin, Goenka’s teacher, equanimity with the correct understanding of impermanence permits the release of *sankharas* (Khin, 1991: 31-32). The practice of Vipassana consists of observing physical sensations in a systematic fashion while maintaining the awareness of impermanence. Vipassana becomes a new operative system of the human computer, transforming the habitual automatism of reacting, and the user should ideally accept whatever arises, altering the habitual modern pattern of reacting and wandering in ordinary states of consciousness.

V.II.V METTA

The aim of the third meditative performance promoted by this tradition, Metta, is to overcome the apparent neutrality of Vipassana, directing the merits, good feelings and other benefits emerging from meditative practice towards other beings.

Metta is taught on the 10th day of the retreat, when noble silence is lifted. It should be ideally practiced while experiencing subtle sensations, and one should expand this energy out into the world. If the general experience is not pleasant, one should abstain from practicing Metta based on sensations, just working at the intellectual level with a particular sentence.

Metta, in contrast to Anapanasati and Vipassana, involves verbalization, not only by the practitioner but also by Goenka himself, and it is a guided meditation, with the teacher constantly giving instructions¹¹⁵. The inclusion of Metta at the end of a meditation session (both at the retreat, from the 10th day onwards and during daily sittings, when one listens to Goenka tapes¹¹⁶) requires not only verbalization but also imagination, as the following words of Goenka exemplify:

“May I be free...free from all the anger...hatred...ill will...animosity...May I generate Looove and Good Will... Peaceeee and Harmony...Looooove and Good will... Peace and Harmony.... May all beings share my peace....Share my Harmony.... Share my Merits... Share my Dhamma...Dhamma...Dhamma... May all beings be Happy... Be Peaceful....Be Liberated...Liberated...Liberated... Be Happy....Be Peaaaaaceful... Be Liberated...Liberated...Liberated”¹¹⁷.

Metta deals with inter-subjectivity, with the attempt to “spread” the Dhamma (the teaching of the Buddha, understood as the practice of Vipassana) to others, through what Pagis (2008) calls soft feelings (love, compassion, etc.). In retreats, Metta is explicitly recruited to manage the inter-subjective space. Assistant teachers generate Metta during the courses, while they are sitting with students. The servers also practice Metta every morning to help them deal with the retreatants (the “sitters”) in a compassionate way. Finally, Goenka, during the end of discourses, chants in Pali, generating Metta towards students. Goenka instructs old students to benefit from Metta by bowing their heads – according to Vipassana’s subtle anatomy, the top of the head is more prone to feel subtle sensations, therefore bowing helps practitioners to receive these sensations (see Goenka, 2002b: 76).

These three technologies are usually practiced in a sequence by meditators during daily sittings. In the beginning of a meditation session, one starts practicing Anapana to become aware of sensations on the area of the

¹¹⁵ As opposed to Anapana and Vipassana, where instructions are only given at the beginning of the session.

¹¹⁶ Some old students use audio tapes with Goenka’s instructions in order to meditate.

¹¹⁷ Transcript of a tape of Metta Bhavana (instructions given by S. N. Goenka) available online <http://diydharm.org/vipassana-meditation-track-1-sn-goenka> (Retrieved: 12/04/2013)

nose; then, Vipassana is practiced, and in the end some minutes are dedicated to Metta. The aim is to initially develop concentration (Anapana) to be able to feel sensations throughout the body (Vipassana) and to spread the benefits of meditation (Metta). This indicates that we are not only dealing with the transformation of automatisms but also with the development of new feelings and experiences that support new ways of being in the world and that should inform inter-subjectivity.

After presenting these three practices, there are two relevant aspects that should be mentioned here: first, Vipassana's claims of "scientificity", comparing the meditator to a scientist; second, its focus on "purity". These two aspects will help us understand the practice of Vipassana.

V.II.VI SCIENTIFICITY

Entanglements between meditation and science are well known: not only meditation is assessed by various fields of science, including instruments such as fMRI's, but there are also well-established dialogues between Buddhism, neurosciences (Austin, 1998), psychology (Wilber et al., 1986; Kabat-Zinn, 1991) and even physics (Bitbol, 2006) (see chapter II). Vipassana is coupled with narratives and ideas of science, resembling other schools of meditation (Tambiah, 1985), including Transcendental Meditation, and according to Robert Sharf this results from the fact that some Burmese meditation teachers were exposed to the Western, Christian critique of Buddhism (they were educated by Christian missionaries) and its esotericism (Sharf, 1995).

First, what is the epistemological status of the Vipassana meditator? According to Goenka, he should act like a scientist: "Examine the pain that you experience objectively, as if it is someone else's pain. Inspect it like a scientist who observes an experiment in his laboratory. When you fail, try again." (Goenka, 1987, 44). The equanimous gaze is "scientific": one should be detached from sensations, maintaining the continuity of practice, repeating the performance – meditation becomes a technology, a type of anthropotechnics,

and no religion is involved, it is a scientific gaze towards oneself, a mere somatic mode of attention. As Joanna told me:

“As a meditator, I’m a scientist, we are scientists, I think we are scientists, learning to observe our minds and our bodies. Because consciousness is there, and interpretation of consciousness is there. And then evaluating, that’s what we’re learning to change, our evaluation of our experiences, to be less judgemental about them.” (Interview, Joanna, April 2012)

To be a scientist is to be able to observe sensations throughout the body without evaluating them, with equanimity. In conventional accounts of objectivity, there was a separation between subjectivity and objectivity. Objectivity, as a quality of the equanimous gaze, transforms the mind into an objective machine that is able to tackle the depths of reality – the mind becomes a machine of epistemological truth. According to Daston and Galison:

“By *mechanical objectivity* we mean the insistent drive to repress the wilful intervention of the artist-author, and to put in its stead a set of procedures that would, as it were, move nature to the page through a strict protocol, if not automatically. This sometimes meant using an actual machine, sometimes a mechanized action such as tracing.” (Daston and Galison, 2007: 121)

In order to reach the status of a machine of truth, the human automatism of reacting towards sensations is transformed through a new automatism, Vipassana, that permits observation without reaction – the equanimous self becomes objective through the implementation of a new epistemological software that not only transforms the quality of observation but also allows new phenomena to be experienced.

If Vipassana is understood as a way of seeing things as they truly are, in a scientific and objective sense, meaning that the meditator will have access to the true nature of reality, experiences of meditation are considered the vehicle for the unveiling of “truth”. A good example concerns the set of experiences of bodily dissolution that will be explored in chapter VI; these reveal the “true nature” of human bodies, assemblages composed of tiny little *kapalas*, subatomic particles that create the illusion of solidity. The body is understood as

deprived from solidity, confirming the general ontology of *anicca* - "Particles [that] continuously arise and vanish, passing into and out of existence, like a flow of vibrations." (Hart, 1987: 25- 26). These *kalapas* are indivisible units that express the four aspects of matter - mass, coherence, temperature and movement (Hart, 1987). Body sensations are connected to the *kalapas*, masses formed out of the four constituents of matter (solid, liquid, calorific and oscillatory), the primary qualities, and subsidiary qualities - colour, smell, taste, and nutriment.¹¹⁸ When these eight constituents unite, a *kalapa* is formed, lasting for a moment (a trillionth of a second) and, according to U Ba Khin, for someone experienced in Vipassana, they can be felt as a stream of energy (Khin, 1991: 32).

This new subtle anatomy of the body is not felt immediately after the introduction of Vipassana. One has to master the technique, repeat the performance endless times, becoming familiar with the conceptual apparatus supporting the tradition (its standpoint psychology). Advanced practitioners are able to translate their experiences into this new subtle anatomy (see chapter VI and Leledaki, 2007: 166-167).

Finally, although this practice suspends modern understandings of causality and of what humans can experience (see chapters VI and VII), Vipassana is considered a scientific technology of the self that should establish practitioners in the law of *Kamma*, cause and effect. If one does not remain equanimous towards sensations, a *sankhara* will be generated, and it will multiply suffering. This is considered the "law of nature", to be known experientially through meditation (Goenka, 1987: 37). The practice of Vipassana thus follows supposedly universal laws of nature that also regulate the psychic life of the individual. Human life is bound to permanent, immutable universal laws, requiring a performative adaptation of the subject to become happy, nonreactive, equanimous. Another relevant aspect concerns the technology of Vipassana itself. For the sake of the reproducibility of the meditative performance, its adaptability to different phenomenological situations requires meditators to reduce whatever happens within the body/self to mere sensations.

¹¹⁸ See Goenka, (1987:54) for a correlation between the different types of *kalapas* and the sensations they cause.

This involves a reduction of the classical four Buddhist objects of meditation (body, feelings, mind states and mental objects, see Hanh, 2006b), implying that meditative practice is focused only on the body and feelings¹¹⁹. Moreover, it grants sensations the role of translating the totality of individual existence into an object of meditative practice, acquiring a special status over thoughts, vision, smell, understood as secondary or subsidiary qualities. Although it could be suggested that this technique is reductive, the aim is to transform habitual patterns of reaction through the focus on a particular element of experience – sensations. Focusing on sensations generates a wide range of transformations, allowing meditators to perform a different version of the body and new ways of being in everyday life, transforming their Umwelt.

V.II.VII PURITY

The second aspect concerns performative purity. Vipassana is portrayed as the technique practiced by the Buddha, maintained in its pristine form for centuries in Burma. Goenka is considered the one who is giving this “pure technique of the Buddha” to the entire world. According to the Satipathana Sutta and to other texts, such as the Visudhimagga, the Buddha used different types of meditation; however, according to this movement, this type of Vipassana has a superior status and should be practiced by all humans in the same way, becoming universal. According to the Buddhist scholar Robert Sharf¹²⁰, Vipassana as we know it (sweeping sensations throughout the body) was invented by Goenka. In fact, U Ba Khin, Goenka’s teacher, didn’t prescribe sweeping the body in the same way as Goenka does (producing the so called free flow that can happen when there are subtle sensations on the body), but told students to scan the body using areas the size of small Burmese coins. Moreover, Ledi Sayadaw, considered by Goenka as one of the teachers in the

¹¹⁹ See Kornfield (2010) for an excellent characterization of other Vipassana techniques and their corresponding teachers.

¹²⁰ I had the chance to ask some questions to Robert Sharf at the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute 2013.

long lineage of Vipassana (going back to the Buddha himself), actually invented the tradition in Burma, after reading ancient Buddhist texts (see Sharf, 1995, for some insightful remarks on the invented tradition of Vipassana in Burma).

Although we are probably dealing with an invented tradition, Goenka wants to make sure that this technique is maintained in its pristine form, and practitioners should undertake this performance exactly as prescribed by the teacher. We face what Leledaki (2007) characterizes as a form of spiritual eugenics: not only there is a cleansing of external elements, such as other techniques of meditation, but there is also the creation of a mythology supporting the superiority and potential of such practice for “liberation”. During the 10-day courses the participants are fed with some of these myths, namely the fact that the King Ashoka, one of the early disseminators of Buddhism, sent some monk emissaries to Burma with the technique of Vipassana, that was transmitted from generation to generation in its pristine form¹²¹; Goenka, in the evening discourses, even mentions a prophecy that says that, after 2500 years of the death of the Buddha, Vipassana would return to India, assuming himself (although indirectly) as the protagonist of such phenomenon, as the Maitreya, the Buddha of the future¹²².

Purity has a strong role in Vipassana. The retreat space also has to be “pure”, cleansed from external elements, and no food from the outside can be brought on site. The Vipassana assemblage has to be filled with particular vibrations. As we have seen, the goal of Vipassana is to “break” the habit of reacting to sensations, generating *sankharas* that, according to U Ba Khin, become accumulated, creating a bank account of *sankharas*¹²³. While one is equanimously dealing with whatever happens with sensations, maintaining the

¹²¹ See Jordt (2007) on this aspect and its links to the Mahasi Sayadaw Vipassana movement in Burma; Various Authors (1991) and Khin (1999) for the appropriation of such myth by the Goenka movement.

¹²² Much could be written about the rhetorical use of this mythological paraphernalia and its linkages to historical, spiritual and performative “purity”. As Baudrillard states, “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity.” (Baudrillard, 2001: 171)

¹²³ U Ba Khin was an accountant, so the use of this kind of language is understandable.

precepts, the mind is supposedly being “purified”, releasing *sankharas*, cleansing the human assemblage from those defilements¹²⁴. Retreats, as we have seen in the previous chapter, are organized in such a way that sensorial inputs are reduced to a minimum: not only to centralize mechanisms of re-patterning through practices, materials, constraints and performances but also to *suspend* the regular aesthetic enjoyment of music, sex or spectacular images. Therefore, purity is a device whose ramifications are mobilized to bring about a shift in paradigms of the self through the suspension of habitual associations and automatisms, justifying a cleansing of external elements and the focus on the installation of new automatisms that can lead to new ways of experiencing the self and the world.

V.III THICH NHAT HANH’S ZEN PRACTICES

V.III.I INTRODUCTION

The practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh also aim at the transformation of habitual automatisms, leading to the installation of new habits and the alteration of regular experience; however, the approach is radically different from Goenka’s Vipassana. Instead of promoting sitting meditation in isolation, Hanh’s approach focuses on the development of various practices that cultivate mindfulness. The philological roots of mindfulness go back to the Pali word *sati* (*smṛti* in Sanskrit). It means two things: “to stop” and “to maintain awareness of the object” (Hanh, 2006a: 10). The Chinese character for mindfulness, *nian*, has two components: heart (or mind), and present moment (Hanh, 1997a: 33). But what exactly is mindfulness? For Thay¹²⁵, “Mindfulness

¹²⁴ According to Douglas (2006), dirt should be understood as “matter out of place”, implying the existence of an *a priori* ordered system where the presence of certain body or element is strange (such as shoes on the table), becoming “dirty”. Regarding Vipassana, dirt concerns all those elements that can jeopardize meditation: these could be the five hindrances - craving, aversion, mental and physical sluggishness, agitation and doubt (Hart, 1987:89); breaking *sila* or even the sensuous world.

¹²⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh is called Thay (teacher) by his followers.

is the energy that sheds light on all things and all activities, producing the power of concentration, bringing forth deep insight and awakening” (Hanh, 1974: 26). This energy is directed towards the present moment – the present is the object of mindfulness - that is why, in the classical “The Miracle of Mindfulness”, Hanh states that “I’ll use the term mindfulness to refer to keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” (Hanh, 2008a: 11). As its etymological roots indicate, there are two dimensions of mindfulness: stopping and looking deeply, exemplifying the connections between stopping, awareness and insight into the nature of the self and reality. Mindfulness, as a state of consciousness, contrasts with OSC (see chapter II), with modern, everyday consciousness, characterized by mind wandering and task-unrelated-thoughts. In order to suspend regular automatisms, subjects are invited to engage in different technologies that progressively allow them to experience the present moment and to become engaged with other humans and nonhumans. If, in Vipassana, practice is supported by particular ways of understanding the human condition, by a standpoint psychology, where humans are “condemned” to a state of eternal reactivity (unless they “purify” themselves through meditation), then in Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen practices there is also a theory of mind supporting the wide range of mindfulness techniques.

V.III.II THE MIND AS A GARDEN

This psychology is divided in two parts: mind consciousness and store consciousness. Mind consciousness is our “active awareness” (Hanh, 2010: 9), and can be cultivated by being “truly present with whatever we are doing.” (Hanh, 2010: 9). Store consciousness, or root consciousness, is where all our past experiences are stored in the form of seeds (bija). Our mind is like a field, and “Every day our thoughts, words and deeds plant new seeds in the field of our consciousness, and what these seeds generate becomes the substance of our life.” (Hanh, 2006a: 25). These seeds (such as anger, despair, discrimination, fear, mindfulness, compassion or understanding) are located in store consciousness, that is constituted by the totality of the seeds, it is a kind of

soil preserving and maintaining them; when we hear, see, read or think about something, it “touches” a seed and provokes a certain reaction, such as anger, joy or sorrow, making the seed manifest at our mind consciousness, emerging as a mental formation (Hanh, 2010: 10)¹²⁶.

Human minds are understood as gardens, where certain seeds flourish and others can decay, due to our practice, our “gardening”. The aim of mindfulness is to take care of mental gardens, nourishing positive seeds, touching them as mental formations when they arise in our minds, leading Hanh to state that “mindfulness is like the sun” (Hanh, 2000: 80) and that “mental formations are photosensitive” (Hanh 2000: 80).

There are unwholesome and wholesome seeds in our minds, therefore the practice of mindfulness is that of selective watering, helping the subject to identify the seeds in his/her consciousness, choosing which ones are beneficial and should be watered (Hanh, 2006a: 25). This selective cultivation is meant to transform the self through the development of understanding, love and compassion, positive seeds that should lead to positive mental formations. This means that everyday life experience should be transformed, and practitioners are encouraged to take care of their mental gardens. Mindfulness allows them to alter modern ways of being in the world, promoting the cultivation of particular emotions and fostering nondual experiences and modes of being.

V.III.III CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS

For Thich Nhat Hanh, meditation has to be engaged with life, and mindfulness is intentionally developed through a vast array of practices that contrast with modern automatisms, transforming regular actions and allowing new ways of experiencing the environment. I will focus on three categories: those that involve a specific time/period for individual practice, concerning different ways of changing the normal workings of the self – sitting meditation,

¹²⁶ See Hanh (2006a: 24) for an explanation of the threefold function of store consciousness.

walking meditation or deep relaxation. Then, practices relying on the adjustment of daily life situations to the performative requirements of mindfulness – eating meditation, driving meditation, brushing the teeth meditation, etc.. Finally, techniques concerning inter-subjectivity – dharma sharing, beginning anew, etc. - forms of incorporating mindfulness to manage interpersonal relations, solving conflicts or sharing insights emerging from the practice.

How are performances managed throughout these different devices? First of all, there is a general slowing down – movements become slow, attentive, to allow subjects to become aware of the activity¹²⁷, reinforcing the role of movement to alter affect and experience (Massumi, 2002); secondly, while one is performing these various tasks, one has to be aware of the breath – this natural tool is used as an anchor or centring mechanism, allowing the meditator to come back to the present moment – the chaos of OSC is “suspended”; thirdly, there are various short poems, or gathas, that are mentally repeated in order to adjust one’s mindset to the optimal experience of mindfulness. These aim at establishing new mental connections, altering how one conceptualizes different existential dimensions, re-patterning one’s experience of the world through inner utterance. For instance, while one is brushing the teeth, the following gatha can be mentally repeated: “Brushing my teeth and rinsing my mouth, // I vow to speak purely and lovingly. // When my mouth is fragrant with right speech, // A flower blooms in the garden of my heart” (Hanh, 1997b: 5); fourthly, there is an explicit association between the energy of mindfulness and the nondual awareness of Interbeing. If the previous devices contrast with modern ways of being in the world, Interbeing invites participants to abandon dual notions of subjectivity, opening themselves to couplings with other humans and nonhumans.

Interbeing is an ontological principle meaning that form is emptiness, that there are no closed entities, that there is no self without non-self elements.

¹²⁷ One of Latour’s hypothesis in “We have never been modern” is that, in order to deal with the imperial march of modernity, a general slowing down is necessary: “My hypothesis... is that we are going to have to slow down, reorient and regulate the proliferation of monsters by representing their existence officially.” (Latour, 1991a: 12). This is linked to the so-called “parliament of things”, partially discussed in chapter VIII.

Everything is connected and in constant interaction. Interbeing means that there is no stable, unified, closed self - everything is in touch and is impermanent, reminding us of post-humanist literature on entanglements, intra-actions, couplings and relationality (Pickering, 1995; Barad, 2003; Haraway, 2003; Latour, 2005). There is no life or death, just a permanent dance of fluidity. Things are mere manifestations in a process of unending transition between forms – clouds, paper, rain, earth, and each one of these various forms contain each other. The following passage is quite illustrative:

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be”, we have a new verb, inter-be.... the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.” (Hanh, 1995: 95-6).

Interbeing is Thich Nhat Hanh’s way of interpreting the Buddhist notion of *paticca samuppada*, dependent co-arising – “In this doctrine, reality appears as a dynamically interdependent process. All factors, mental and physical, subsist in a web of mutual causal interaction, with no element or essence held to be immutable or autonomous.” (Macy, 1991: 18)

The nonmodern notion of Interbeing has clear connections with post-humanist STS and also with general systems theory, as suggested by Joanna Macy (1991). All entities are connected, there is no substantial separation between them - they emerge precisely because they are entangled and interconnected. The practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh should allow practitioners to become aware of these nondual entanglements between body, mind, environment, self and others, contrasting with dualist and modern understandings of reality. This permits the emergence of nonmodern versions of subjectivity supported by technologies of mindfulness that foster a whole new set of transformations of experience and affect, inspiring numerous social applications (see chapters VI, VII and VIII).

The incorporation of Interbeing into practices of mindfulness is done through various ways, but the more explicit ones are during eating meditation (when there is an attempt to focus on the set of heterogeneous conditions leading to the generation of food, including human and biological processes) and walking meditation - when such activity is practiced outside, one is invited to engage with nature, contemplating the flow of a river, listening to the birds singing or hugging a tree, ideally altering the experience of the Umwelt through the transformation of somatic modes of attention.

After presenting some of the assumptions supporting practices of mindfulness, as well as identifying some of their common mechanisms, I will now focus on some of them. Due to the existence of a multiplicity of these techniques, the task of describing, explaining and exploring each one of them would require another PhD dissertation; therefore, I will limit my analysis to some of the most common technologies of the self deployed by this tradition.

V.III.IV SITTING MEDITATION

In Plum Village, the Sangha sits to practice formal meditation twice a day – during the morning (at 5:45 am) and by the end of the afternoon (around 17:00). During the Sangha weekly meetings, sitting meditation is also practiced. The amount of time dedicated to this activity varies, since the retreats in Plum Village are not designed in a regimented way. The average time dedicated to each session of sitting meditation is approximately 20 minutes, but in some occasions it can reach 45 minutes.

One should sit, if possible, in the lotus or half lotus position, using a cushion, making sure that both knees touch the floor, since having three points in contact with the floor enhances stability (Hanh, 2008a: 34). If this is hard, the practitioner can use the cross legged position or another one that feels comfortable (Hanh, 2011: 17). Some of the more elderly meditators use a small stool to meditate, because they tend to develop knee pain.

The back has to be straight, with the neck and head aligned with the spinal column, and the eyes can be closed or focused a yard or two in front of the practitioner, who should display a half smile¹²⁸; different hand positions can be used, but the left hand can be placed on the right palm with the palm side up, for instance (Hanh, 2008a: 35). It is common, in Plum Village, to have one of the older monks correcting the posture of practitioners: usually the back is straightened and the neck and the hands are readjusted – this happened to me twice, and it was highly helpful to develop a stable posture¹²⁹.

The practice of sitting meditation should bring joy and nourishment, therefore one is discouraged from holding on to a position for a long time if it is painful. In fact, Thay even criticizes some traditions for transforming meditation into discomfort (see Hanh, 1995: 17). This clashes with Vipassana's approach, namely with the one hour sittings of strong determination, reinforcing the distinction between disciplinary and liberal approaches to meditation, as suggested in the previous chapter.

The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing (Hanh, 1996a) and the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness (Hanh, 2006b) list different

¹²⁸ The smile is one of the ubiquitous aspects that have to be observed throughout all different practices.

¹²⁹ I had a very powerful experience the first time that my posture was adjusted. As I wrote in the field diary of my first trip to Plum Village: "At 5:30 it was time for meditation again. Plenty of bells and gongs and no instructions at all, just some entrancing words in French. Today my meditation wasn't very relaxing. My tinnitus was kicking in really hard and I was struggling to find a posture that would minimize the pulsating sound, unsuccessfully. Then, something happened. Someone (at the beginning I thought it was Thay himself but then someone told me it should have been the Venerable) touched me to correct my posture. It was indescribable, since I've never felt such incredibly healing energy in all my life; first he changed the posture of my back, then my shoulders and finally my head; I immediately stopped feeling any back pain and felt involved by a warm bliss that penetrated my body from back to front. At first I hardly noticed I was being touched, as it seemed to be beyond the realm of the material; his touch was gentle, caring and wise and I opened my eyes for a couple of seconds to confirm that it was Thay, but I only saw a short figure surrounded by two monks leaving the meditation hall. It could have been him, but after a couple of days I was told it wasn't usual for Thay to touch people, although it is common for the Venerable, the second oldest monk in the Monastery, to do so." (Field Diary, February 2011).

exercises that should be followed during daily activities. In the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing there are sixteen exercises with different objects of practice. These different exercises consist of specific gathas, verbal formulations that should be observed by the practitioner and harmonized with the breath. For instance, the first gatha of the Anapanasati Sutra is “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out” (Hanh, 1996a: 41). When someone is practicing, the breath is harmonized with the gatha, that is reduced – when one breathes in, one can repeat to oneself “In”, breathing out one says to oneself “Out”. The same goes with other exercises – “Breathing in, I am embracing my unpleasant feelings. Breathing out, I am calming my feelings” turns into “Embracing my feelings [breathing in], Calming my feelings [breathing out]” (Hanh 1996a: 80)¹³⁰.

The aim of these exercises is the implementation of new ways of feeling the body, and the transformation of affect is done through the articulation between the breath and particular sentences, suggestions that reinforce the embracement of feelings or the awareness of the breath. In both cases, practitioners are asked to become aware of a natural, unreflective automatism (the breath) and to accompany this awareness with particular sentences that reinforce meditative ways of experiencing the body/self, establishing new mental associations.

How should these exercises be practiced? Is there a sequence one should follow? As in contemporary neo-liberal regimes, practitioners should be able to identify and assess their state of mind and choose the most adequate formulation. However, They also recognizes that the first exercises are for stopping and the last ones for “looking deeply”, although there is an interrelation between Samatha (concentration) and Vipassana (Hanh, 1996a: 40). Although sitting meditation may be “intended to provide an experience of calmness in a perfectly controlled environment” (as put by a monk during the induction

¹³⁰ These various exercises are not in some sort of hierarchy or a specific order leading to “enlightenment”. They suggests that practitioners should be able to know which ones to follow, although the first few exercises should be initially performed to bring about stability and well-being. (Hanh, 2000: 150)

session¹³¹), the aim of the practice is to go beyond sitting meditation. The various exercises that are prescribed in the two sutras should be practiced all day, not only during formal sittings¹³². In Plum Village, beyond these exercises, it is also common to have guided meditations led by Thich Nhat Hanh, drawing on different gathas and the sound of the bell, invited in regular intervals, and the same happens during the weekly meetings of the Sangha, when an experienced practitioner guides the meditation.

V.III.V WALKING MEDITATION

Walking meditation is a central practice for this tradition. It can be practiced indoor or outdoor, and during the formal periods of sitting meditation in Plum Village it is usually practiced by the end of the meditation session. During the weekly meetings of the Sangha there is also a period dedicated to walking meditation, between the guided and silent meditations. A set of mechanisms are mobilized to transform the habitual automatism of walking.

First of all, walking should be emptied of any type of concern about the final destination – walking has to be done for the sake of walking, clashing with the deep rooted habit of using it as an instrument to travel a particular distance; one should just join the meditative choreography, without thinking about the destination: “Walking meditation is walking just to enjoy walking. Walking without arriving, that is the technique ... The idea is that we do not put anything ahead of ourselves and run after it... We just enjoy the walking, with no particular aim or destination” (Hanh, 2009: 13).

The first aspect is that of aimlessness, one walks for the sake of walking, which implies a slowing down and a focus on the present moment.

¹³¹ The induction session is when newcomers are introduced to the practices taking place in Plum Village.

¹³² As Thay states, “This practice [mindfulness] can be done not only in sitting meditation but also in every minute of our daily life.” (Hanh, 2006b: 121)

The second aspect is a form of anatomo-politics (Foucault, 1995) of the moving body, involving the coordination between breath and steps, reinforcing the importance of movement for the transformation of selfhood (Massumi, 2002). Indoors, the practitioner walks very slowly, and takes one step for each breath. Outside, the pace can be slightly faster, and it may be necessary to take two or four steps for each breath, saying “In” each time a step is taken with each in-breath and “Out” with the out breath. While walking, the attention should be focused on the feet touching the ground, and at the same time one should be aware of the breath.

The third aspect concerns inter-subjectivity – we have to be careful about the person in front of us, slowing down or walking faster according to him or her. It is not an individual but a collective practice, and an exercise in inter-subjectivity. In walking meditation outside, it is also common to hold someone’s hand. It is an opportunity to explore the communitarian aspect of this practice and to benefit from the collective energy of the Sangha (see chapter IV), thus becoming a practical manifestation of Interbeing.

The fourth aspect concerns aesthetic fruition, enjoying nature. Outdoor meditation is particularly pleasant in Plum Village or in locations with natural surroundings, such as the days of mindfulness I attended in Devon. When one is practicing, one is not alone – ponds, trees, rocks, the sky, all these elements, constituting Interbeing, are present, and the practitioner is encouraged to stop at certain moments in order to look at them

In the previous chapter, I have suggested that Vipassana and Zen assemblages draw upon different devices of enrolment (Callon, 1986). There is a contrast between Vipassana’s focus on isolation and Zen’s approach, relying on the expansion of habitual networks of subjectivity. Walking meditation is an interesting example to explore the nonmodern paradigm of subjectivity enacted by mindfulness. The practitioner expands the object of contemplation from individual subjectivity to all other elements (including nonhumans) that belong to the relational, nonmodern ontology of Interbeing. The transformations operated by the implementation of a new automatism, walking meditation, are deeply

entangled with a new paradigm of subjectivity, and these nonmodern couplings between aesthetics and ontology are also clear regarding eating meditation.

V.III.VI EATING MEDITATION

Mindful eating transforms the automatism of eating, coupling performative and aesthetic transformations with ontological changes. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the dining hall of Plum Village there is a gatha saying “This piece of bread is an ambassador from the entire cosmos”. That sentence illustrates the ontology of Interbeing, permeating all the practices of this tradition, entangling the performance of eating with a nonmodern picture of the self and the world.

There are three aspects worth mentioning here. The first one concerns the performance of eating itself. It can be considered a somaesthetics (Shusterman, 1999)¹³³ of nourishment: one has to slowly fill the spoon or pick the food with a fork, feeling the movements of the arm and the hand when the utensil reaches the mouth, and when the food enters the body one is invited to feel every movement of the tongue and jaws, chewing the food very slowly, until it is liquefied before reaching the stomach. There is a focus on slowness and the appreciation of every bite, leading to another relevant aspect - the awareness of Interbeing.

Secondly, when one eats one should be aware of non-self elements, embracing the interconnectedness between all existing entities. Food should be recognized not as an isolated substance but as a process resulting from human work (cooking, ploughing, driving, etc.), biology (necessary to allow the development of the “product”), meteorology and cosmology (including the action

¹³³ According to Shusterman, “Somaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensoryaesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning.” (Shusterman, 1999: 302)

of the rain and the sun). One should be aware of this heterogeneous interdependence, while at the same time slowing down and applying mindfulness to the eating process, radically contrasting with disenchanting and detached approaches to nourishment, supported by industrial, massive and gruesome mechanisms of transforming animals into edible matter (Singer, 1975). Usually we do not pay much attention to these processes, and the aim of eating meditation is to allow practitioners to become aware of these associations, transforming eating into a nonmodern performance, extending the boundaries of the self.

One of the various exercises proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh, called “tangerine party”, illustrates this entanglement between mindfulness and Interbeing:

“We put the tangerine in the palm of our hand and look at it, breathing in a way that the tangerine becomes real. ... To look at the tangerine is to see the blossom forming into the fruit, to see the sunshine and the rain. The tangerine in our palm is the wonderful presence of life. ...

Mindfully, we peel our tangerine and smell its fragrance. We carefully take each section of the tangerine and put it on our tongue, and we can feel that it is a real tangerine. We eat each section of the tangerine in perfect mindfulness until we finish the entire fruit. ...” (Hanh, 1988: 47-48).

It is worth mentioning that the language used by Thich Nhat Hanh can be, in some occasions, extremely kitsch. This is his strategy to permit a paradigm shift of subjectivity, developing a language that translates Buddhist practices into contemporary settings. This language, as well as the techniques developed by Thich Nhat Hanh, are skilful means that support the practice of meditation in contemporary, western contexts.

The third aspect concerns the recognition of other humans sitting at the table - when someone sits, he should bow, repeating the process while leaving the table, reinforcing the communitarian aspect of practice.

V.III.VII GOVERNING THE INTER-SUBJECTIVE REALM

A relevant dimension of these Zen practices is to alter inter-subjectivity. In this section, I will focus on Dharma Sharing and Beginning Anew, two practices that govern speech. Foucault, through his analysis of the Greek notion of *parresia*, translated as saying everything, free-spokenness or free speech (Foucault, 2010:43), suggested that technologies of the self require a relation to others. For Foucault,

“One cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person. And the role of this other is precisely to tell the truth, to tell the whole truth, or at any rate to tell all the truth that is necessary, and to tell it in a certain form which is precisely *parresia*...” (Foucault, 2010: 43).

In Vipassana retreats, verbalization is practically eliminated; however, in the Zen tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh we find explicit procedures to make up people through the control of their speech – verbalization is thus part of a wider project of human engineering. This exemplifies a major difference between these two projects of the self: Vipassana aims at transforming individuals through a particular technique of inner gaze and its ramifications on human actions, whereas Zen mobilizes processes of training that focus on the totality of the individual, supported by a variety of techniques.

Dharma sharing is regularly practiced during the retreats and usually at the end of each Sangha meeting. People usually sit in a circle, and in some cases they present themselves before the beginning of the session. Whenever anyone wants to share something, he or she starts by saluting everyone, joining the palms and bowing. People draw on their life narrative, some particular episode that they believe should be presented to the community, and how the framework of mindfulness relates to that. In some cases, a monk/nun is present to guide the session, and he/she can suggest a particular theme. Thich Nhat Hanh explains this exercise in the following way:

“Base your sharing only on your own experience of the practice rather than about abstract ideas and theoretical topics. Many of us share similar difficulties and aspirations ... One person shares at a time. While that person is speaking, everyone follows their breathing and listens deeply

without judging or reacting, and without making cross talk or offering advice.” (Hanh, 2009: 106)

These events are not only about regulating what one should speak about, but also how one should listen. Deep listening is the mindful way of listening: one breathes, listens without giving advice or making any judgment, just with the aim of relieving the suffering of the other, with compassion (Hanh, 2009: 85). Before speaking, the subject practices some form of mindfulness, such as breathing or walking meditation.

Another mindful practice explicitly dealing with verbalization is called beginning anew, and it is undertaken in order to solve conflicts¹³⁴. There are a variety of applications of mindfulness that transform speaking, installing new ways of using words and of weighing its consequences on others. This “extension” of mindfulness practices to dimensions such as speech is part of a broader project of enacting a paradigm of meditative subjectivity. As I suggest in the following sections, this requires practitioners to use mindfulness techniques in a variety of situations.

V.III. VIII PERFORMATIVE CONTINUITY

These technologies are not necessarily isolated practices but performative expressions of mindfulness. The exercises proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh support the continuity of mindfulness in every situation – mindfulness, therefore, becomes a sort of virtual or spiritual immutable mobile that is activated by particular techniques and gestures carrying forms of

¹³⁴ In Plum Village it is practiced every week. The first step concerns flower watering – the person who initiated the practice has to acknowledge the qualities and strong points of the subject he or she is having a problem with. In the second part, one should express regret for something done or said that may have hurt others. The third part concerns eliciting ways in which others have hurt us. Finally, “We listen to another’s hurts and difficulties with the willingness to relieve the suffering of the other person, not to judge or argue with her. We listen with all our attention” (Hanh, 2009: 74). The session is closed with a song or with mindful breathing.

performative subjectification. Mindfulness is understood as a way of life. This means that it is necessary to develop tools, exercises, performances that readjust human activity to the requirements of mindfulness and Interbeing. These adjustments rely on the pillars of this practice (the gathas, slowing down, the breath and the awareness of the activity), are supported by the *actants* that structure the spiritual-technical networks of mindful practice (such as the bells and their program of making people stop and breathe, as we have seen in the previous chapter) and affect performances as diverse as managing the moving body, looking at landscapes, relating to other bodies, governing intersubjectivity, or using bodily processes (such as the breath) to tune in to mindfulness. In that sense, the maintenance of the performative order does not rely on discontinuous, isolated spiritual exercises, as in Vipassana, but on the attempt to being present and alert while conducting a certain activity, whether walking, speaking, using the telephone, eating or sitting. In order to be mindful, there are permanent mechanisms that are used to come back to the present moment and that create new associations with the movements of the body, speech or imagination.

V.III.XIX THE COLLECTIVE DIMENSION OF TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

Zen performances in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh transcend the realm of individual practice. First, the standpoint psychology that sustains and justifies these technologies of mindfulness enacts a version of subjectivity that is highly de-centred and extended. Automatisms are not individual, they supposedly run through generations, and have to be dealt with in order to allow self-transformation, reminding us of Bourdieu's remarks on the collective nature of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) and post-humanist approaches to subjectivity, informed by relational ontologies that recognize the heterogeneous, intergenerational and entangled dimension of affect (Blackman, 2010; Venn, 2010; Manning, 2010). According to Thay and the relational ontology of Interbeing, the ancestors still live in us, and all generations, both past and future, practice with us, an assumption which clashes with dominant, modern

and dualistic versions of subjectivity - the *homo clausus* (Elias, 1978). This can be understood at an abstract level, exemplifying a special ontological or theoretical framework, but also literally. Some practitioners can have contact with deities (Devas) or even spiritual teachers from the past¹³⁵. It is suggested that Dipa Ma, a very advanced meditator, can “appear” to some of his students while they are practicing (see Schmidt, 2005), and the range of experiences analyzed in chapters VI and VII confirm that these nondual ontologies can be actually enacted.

Some practitioners develop connections with their ancestors, and they feel they have to be in touch with them to progress in their practice. As Bob told me “I have felt that sometimes I can make my grandparents free in me, and I can change that cycle of suffering... If I smile, my grandfathers smile.” (Interview, Bob, February 2011). This nonmodern, more encompassing paradigm of subjectivity has strong links with deep ecology, leading to phenomena of identification with other humans and nonhumans and nonmodern ways of tackling social issues (see chapters VI, VII and VIII).

Secondly, and following the previous point, engaging with other practitioners is encouraged. Walking meditation outside can involve holding someone else’s hand, there are specific instances to promote this collective spirit (such as the practices of dharma sharing or beginning anew) and technologies of mindfulness are devices to transform human interactions¹³⁶. This means that these practices translate programs of action that help subjects to transform their relationship with partners, family members, friends and strangers - they are devices that bring forth a paradigm shift of human existence. In sum, these practices are intentional in the sense that they should be included, developed and supported by interactions between selves and others and influence virtually all dimensions of human life.

¹³⁵ See Lerner (1977) for a first person account of such experience.

¹³⁶ I don’t view human interactions and public behaviour in the sense of Goffman, repeating dual accounts of the subject (namely the distinction between actor and performer’s self, Goffman, 1969) characteristic of the *homo laborans* (Arendt, 1958), but as a crucial dimension of spiritual training, meaning that it also involves transforming relationships.

Finally, these performances are supported by associations between humans and nonhumans, as we have seen in the previous chapter. This means that these performances, instead of relying on individualized isolations, depend on novel webs of associations, entanglements between selves, spaces and objects, reshaping one's experience of the self and the world.

V.IV THE PERFORMATIVITY OF ANTHROPOTECHNICS

Zen and Vipassana assemblages require a subject whose automatisms have to be transformed; as anthropotechnics, they radically alter the habitual performances of the human machine - the whole individual should ideally be altered through the installation of new automatisms. We encounter different strategies to allow these transformations to occur, different ways of operating performative subjectification: in Vipassana, one has to sit still, with the eyes closed, scanning the body while remaining aware of *anicca*. This requires a management of posture, a new somatic mode of attention and the maintenance of a certain understanding of the "nature" of reality. Practices of mindfulness privilege coming back to the present moment and to the self through the breath, the use of gathas (that also support certain ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and of daily activities), the management of bodily movements (with a focus on slowing down and eventually on graciousness) and even speaking and listening. Vipassana is a practice that is spatially confined to the meditation hall or the room and enacted through the sitting body and the equanimous mind. Mindfulness mobilizes the sitting, moving, working body in various spaces - the practitioner is invited to interact with others (both humans and nonhumans) and there are common meditative networks that can be recruited to support the practice.

This means that we find differences in terms of the scope of these performative regimes, involving the deployment and management of distinct devices to support them; in sum, these performative regimes govern aspects as distinct as bodily movements, regularities and postures; mental workings

(installing inner gazes and verbalizations) and ecologies (both human, with the government of inter-subjectivity between practitioners as well as interactions between human selves, environments and *actants*). These different ways of mobilizing the totality of the individual constitute distinct forms of dealing with bodies and minds. The sitting body of Vipassana, illustrated by the Adhitanna sittings, should be the body-statue, immobile, unaltered and unaffected by inner and outer inputs, a sort of self-induced and performative suspended animation: one should remain equanimous, and the physical assemblage becomes an instrument to release *sankharas*, purifying oneself. Likewise, the function of the mind is to support this inner gaze, scanning the body from head to feet and vice-versa – no images, hallucinations or any kind of other “distractions” should jeopardize this performative order. Concerning Zen, there is a focus on being gentle towards oneself: no painful sittings, and the body is constantly moving while maintaining mindfulness¹³⁷; the mindful mind should also be able to contemplate a vast array of phenomenal dimensions, not only sensations but also thoughts, emotions, etc..

Secondly, these movements, while deploying a set of performative changes, also draw on explanations and mental maps to support them, standpoint psychologies. In Vipassana, we find the image of the monkey mind, constantly wandering, and the human condition of permanent reactivity towards the world, opposed to the picture of the pure, equanimous mind, of the self that no longer reacts to sensations. Mindfulness is opposed to mindlessness, contrasting with regular ways of being in the world, what Harner calls ordinary state of consciousness, characterized by task unrelated thoughts. These practices are coupled with particular understandings of what selves are, ways of summarizing the basics of nonmeditative experience and of characterizing its main points, contrasting them with alternative paradigms of experiencing mind, body and the world.

¹³⁷ The development of a set of practices of wellbeing, called the mindful movements (Hanh, 2008b), usually undertaken before a long sitting or during walking meditation, exemplifies the importance given by this tradition to the care of the body.

These narratives and maps constitute the hermeneutics of meditation, relatively stable theoretical frameworks that offer a critique of ordinary states of mind and prescribe ways of attaining different paradigms of subjectivity. Following Pickering's remarks on scientific practice (1995), we can understand these performances as forms of "tuning in" to particular forms of agency (in this case, particular realms of experience), and Zen and Vipassana assemblages tell us that paradigms of subjectivity involve the reconfiguration of automatisms, suspending the whole range of techniques that constitute the modern self (one can think of modern education for instance). Altering these habitual performances can lead to the emergence of new forms of experience (see chapter VI) and to the development of new hermeneutical frameworks, providing the contemplative seeker with forms of interpreting meditative and nonmeditative experience.

This has some links with Fleck's reflections on the Wasserman reaction (Fleck, 1979), that was accompanied by the emergence of a community of practitioners who were able to undertake the procedure; similarly, Becker's marijuana smokers (Becker, 1953) also had to develop a new kind of aesthetic expertise that would allow them to enjoy the effects of the drug. In the case of meditation, the proliferation of maps and hermeneutical frameworks, filled with terms and expressions such as *anicca*, *sankharas*, the monkey mind and tangerine party, are used to permit transitions between modern and nonmodern paradigms of the self.

These remarks reinforce the performativity of these meditative performances. Performativity applies to those phenomena that "have to be continuously performed to exist at all" (Callon, 2004 cited in Mackenzie, 2005: 9), emerging through the action of heterogeneous assemblages. According to Guattari, psychological models are also performative:

"Freudian cartography is not only descriptive; it is inseparable from the pragmatics of transference... I would argue that it should be disengaged from a signification perspective and understood as a conversion of expressive means and as a mutation of ontological textures releasing new lines of the possible - and this from the simple fact of putting into place new assemblages of listening and modelisation." (Guattari, 1995: 62-63)

My understanding of performativity is post-humanist (Barad, 2003), consisting not only of material-discursive (as put by Barad) associations but also environmental, energetic (see chapter IV) and performative couplings, thus rejecting merely discursive, Althusserian/Austinian accounts of performativity (see chapter IV and Tambiah, 1985; Butler, 1997a; Althusser, 2008; Austin, 1970). Zen and Vipassana assemblages aim at revealing impermanence or Interbeing in order to undertake subjective changes (including dealing with suffering). In order to do so, they invite practitioners to operate a number of performative transformations. The ontologies of *anicca* and Interbeing, including new experiences, emerge alongside the repetition of a set of practices that conjure up new ways of experiencing the self and reality. These performances invite selves to suspend their habitual, modern automatisms, and to pay attention to their bodies and minds in different ways, installing new automatisms. The transformation of habitual webs of associations (chapter IV) and of regular automatisms lead to reconfigurations of the human assemblage, unveiling states that are not accessible through the habitual, nonmeditative use of bodies and minds. These reconfigurations are new assemblages that allow new ways of being in the world, they permit the emergence of a new Umwelt, in the same way that trains allowed the emergence of the panoramic view that Schivelbusch wrote about (see chapter II) and space exploration permitted astronauts to experience radically new ways of understanding the Earth and Cosmos, undergoing mystical episodes and seeing things in a larger context (Mitchell, 1996).

In order to analyze this interesting phenomenon – the transformation of human experience through couplings between humans, techniques, nonhumans and different settings - Timothy Leary used the example of the microscope:

“The techniques and methods of turning on and controlling the flow and energies of awareness and of mapping where you have gone and of helping others to make these explorations is very similar to the use of the microscope, because the microscope turns you on to levels of energy that are invisible to the naked eye. Turning on requires a change in the physiology of the human body.” (Leary, 1999: 38)

New performative configurations are developed to permit nonmodern experiences that are blocked by modern automatisms and habitual ways of being in the world – the modern self. These performances are performative - without meditative technologies, ontologies such as Interbeing or *anicca* would not emerge: in order to actualize them, new automatisms have to be installed, suspending the technologies of the modern, dual self.

V.V CONCLUSION

This chapter analyzed the set of Zen and Vipassana technologies of the self. These practices involve becoming aware of automatisms in particular ways, directing the attention towards the breath or body movements, installing new automatisms (looking for sensations in the body, walking in particular ways, coming back to the breath when one hears the bell) that are supported by standpoint psychologies, particular ways of understanding the human condition and of prescribing different methods to achieve some results, such as being equanimous or mindful.

The automatisms installed by Zen and Vipassana assemblages suspend modern ways of being in the world – the mind is stilled, one should become aware of the body and the dualist paradigm of the self should be progressively abandoned due to new associations with other humans and nonhumans.

The transformation of habitual performances is the second major device of subjectification developed by Zen and Vipassana. New practices are introduced along with the reconfiguration of habitual settings. These practices require participants to become aware of new ways of understandings selves and the world. They can develop sensitivity towards the impermanent, subtle body of Vipassana or the nondual interconnectedness between all entities – Interbeing.

I argued that we should understand these practices under the guise of post-humanist performativity. Zen and Vipassana performances enact

ontologies comprising particular forms of verbalization, performative changes and associations with nonhumans. Constraints, nonhumans, new performances and verbalizations alter the practitioner's Umwelt, allowing him to experience himself and the world in nonmodern ways. The retreat, as a suspension of the modern, everyday life self, introduces new devices that bring forth nonmodern experiences, emergent phenomena that can "neither be predicted nor explained by examining component parts in isolation" (Macklem, 2008: 1844). Nonhumans, constraints, new gazes, ways of speaking, of walking, eating, sitting and breathing allow the emergence of new, nonmodern paradigms of the human assemblage. New webs of associations and the reconfiguration of automatisms perform a nonmodern paradigm of the self. The role of the following chapter is to explore the wide range of experiences that are enacted by Zen and Vipassana assemblages, contrasting them with modern, dualistic ways of being in the world.

VI. EXPERIENCES

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” (Blake, 2002: 170)

“In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true is true or becomes true – within certain limits – to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. In the mind, there are no limits.” (Lilly, 1967: 19)

VI.I INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters I have explored the devices of subjectification employed by Vipassana and Zen assemblages. In chapter IV I focused on the setting, comprising a set of devices that include constraints, the management of space and new connections with nonhumans, establishing new webs of associations. In chapter V, performances, I analyzed the set of new performances that practitioners should develop in order to suspend habitual automatisms – eating, breathing, walking – installing nonmodern ones.

The reconfiguration of habitual webs of associations and automatisms allows the development of nonmodern forms of experiencing the self and the world. These new experiences include feeling subtle sensations, experiencing the body as totally dissolved, becoming aware of the environment in new ways, feeling a strong sense of presence and even undergoing nondual experiences, constituting alternatives to the dual, modern self.

Initially, the transition from modern to nonmodern paradigms of selfhood is characterized by resistance. There is a struggle between meditative and nonmeditative ontologies that generates pain, boredom, suspicion. Effort is required in order to deal with these difficulties – to be able to tune in on different

ways of feeling the self and the world, participants undergo struggles of agency (an expression that I adapted from Pickering's dances of agency, see Pickering, 1995¹³⁸). The continuation of practice helps meditators to cope with these difficulties and to implement new automatisms, allowing them to feel subtle sensations, to maintain equanimity towards the plethora of sensations and to adopt new ways of experiencing walking, breathing and a variety of other dimensions that include emotions and thoughts (in the case of Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness). In some cases, mystical experiences (James, 2002) take place, signalling "the abandonment of forces to objects and the suspension of the self" (Gomart and Hennion, 1999). Instead of abandoning themselves to objects, practitioners enter realms of experience that they previously ignored and that suspend their habitual sense of selfhood. What these phenomena have in common is a strong sense of nonduality (between body, mind and the environment) that suspends the modern self, with the meditator becoming fully absorbed by an experience that he is unable to control – his will is suspended and he is overwhelmed by radically new ways of being in the world, forms of meditative agency that challenge the dual, autonomous and rational modern subject.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: in the first section, I will reflect on the struggles of agency generated by Vipassana and Zen practices, focusing on issues such as pain, the rebellious mind or difficulties adjusting to the setting; the second section presents an overview of what it means to practice mindfulness and Vipassana – what does one feel and experience while applying these gazes to objects such as the body, emotions and the mind? The final section explores mystical experiences with meditation.

¹³⁸ Pickering, in "The Mangle of Practice" (1995), uses two important notions – "dances of agency" and "dialectic of resistance and accommodation" – to analyze the performative dimension of scientific practice. The notion of "struggles of agency" that I'm using here exemplifies the conflict between modern and nonmodern ontologies of the self, generating a set of resistances such as pain, suspicion or lack of concentration.

VI.II STRUGGLES OF AGENCY

Going on retreat (especially for the first time) can be quite a challenging experience. Preston (1988), following Becker's insights on becoming a marijuana smoker¹³⁹, argued that a similar process is involved in order to fully experience the "effects" of meditation, as we have seen in chapter II. Meditation involves a vast array of practices (Preston was focusing on Japanese Zen in the US), but, regarding Vipassana and Zen, the task is not so much learning to enjoy meditation (although joy is an important part of Thich Nhat Hanh's practices) but to re-order the self in such a way that meditative awareness becomes natural, installing new automatisms. The point is not to identify with a certain sensuous reality (such as the "effects" of meditation) but to implement new automatisms characterized by the gazes of equanimity and mindfulness.

These new automatisms create storms, struggles between programmes of equanimity/mindfulness and pre-meditative selves and their corresponding regimes of selfhood. These clashes are understood as struggles of agency between meditative and nonmeditative automatisms. In order to implement new ways of being, participants have to deal with many resistances, including pain, the difficult process of adaptation to the setting and the habitual configurations of their minds.

V.II.I VIPASSANA PAIN

Vipassana retreats reorganize habitual webs of associations, becoming disciplinary or total institutions for a certain period of time (usually 10 days), as

¹³⁹As Becker (1953: 235) suggested, the pleasant consumption of cannabis depends on three aspects: a) learning to smoke in a way that produces effects; b) recognizing the effects and linking them to the substance; c) enjoying the sensations that are perceived.

we have seen in chapter IV. In Vipassana retreats, one should be in a sort of artificial isolation – although there are dozens of others meditating at the same time, one should focus on oneself, ideally without reacting to whatever may happen. Subjects should endure pain without resorting to analgesics, changing posture or abandoning the practice – in order to develop equanimity, the habitual automatism of reacting to pain should be suspended. In the following passage, Philip recalls his first Vipassana retreat – he had the feeling that the Vipassana organization was particularly sadistic for deliberately putting people through such intense pain:

“The notion of pain, of pain being present and of you being invited to accept it and living with it made me reach such a level of pain that I engaged in a fight with my unconscious that was...I should leave ... because this is a sadistic organization, and the teachers are part of this organization and not even the students or the volunteers know that. They are simply there, the teachers are in the room looking at everyone, watching them suffer. This was a conclusion that my unconscious led me to in order to convince me to get the hell out of there, to end something I'd never thought of doing in my life, that is experiencing... accepting a situation I'm not enjoying.” (Interview, Philip, September 2010)

Philip also told me that since birth we seek sensations we enjoy and run away from unpleasant ones (the same narrative conveyed by Goenka, as we have seen in the previous chapter). Learning to cope with pain, due to long periods of sitting meditation, can even be complicated when the infamous *adhitanna* sittings are introduced, immediately after Vipassana is taught. I remember that during my second retreat I had the distinct feeling of someone stabbing me in the back due to the intense pain I was experiencing. These episodes are understood as tests to one's equanimity, and extreme pain is, according to my informants, relatively frequent and part of the process of detaching oneself from whatever is going on at the physical level. As put by Rebecca:

“I've had pain so severe I thought I wouldn't be able to walk, I am like worried about it, and eventually I'm like...no, stop worrying, you're just worrying, and then...yeah...at the end of the hour the pain goes, and I get up and walk out, and it's like, well...yes, that wasn't a normal pain, it's like a Vipassana pain.” (Interview, Rebecca, April 2012)

Vipassana pain, instead of signalling that something is wrong with the body, is a manifestation of the mind to “test” the subject, making him or her stop the meditative performance by moving the legs, for instance¹⁴⁰. The pain can be understood as a test to one’s equanimity, and the practitioner has to alter the habitual feeling of the body. In order to enact a nonmodern version of the body – the subtle body of vibrations – practitioners have to break the automatism of reacting to pain by changing posture, breaking a previously established connection. As suggested in the previous chapter, a relevant dimension of technologies of the self is the implementation of new “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas, 1999). As dualists Westerns, when we experience pain in the body we tend to believe that it is essentially physical (Jackson, 1994: 207). However, it has been argued that pain is not exclusively biological, being influenced by culture (Csordas, 1993; Bourdieu, 1977; Jackson, 1994). Moreover, intense episodes (such as sadomasochism and some forms of torture) tend to radically alter one’s perception of pain, challenging the boundaries between suffering and bliss, the intolerable and the ecstatic (Miller, 1993; Bataille, 1989). Vipassana assemblages use strong emotions – including pain – as a test, training selves to experience a wide range of phenomenological phenomena with the same mental attitude - equanimity. As one of my informants told me, off the record, this Vipassana pain is actually a test, and the back pain he was experiencing was a sort of an illusion, because once the one hour session came to an end the feeling of the body would return to normal. The pain experienced at Vipassana retreats requires participants to reconfigure their inner gaze, interpreting their experiences in a different way.

¹⁴⁰ Since these retreats are collective, it is common to witness choreographies of people discontinuing the meditative performance, when individuals decide to move one after the other. As put by this informant: “One of them would shuffle and then the next one would shuffle and then the next one would shuffle...you’re fine for the three first shuffles, but it keeps going around and around and around...God save me! I killed people in my imagination... I imagined myself with baseball bats just going on people behind me, yeah, but I kept on sitting and I felt a lot better after that, bastards!” (Interview, Tim, April 2011)

VI.II.II ADJUSTING TO THE COMMUNITY

Contrasting with Vipassana practices, the technologies of the self promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh are not meant to initially cause pain but joy¹⁴¹. An important aspect of these procedures is to invite retreatants to participate in communitarian life: instead of generating artificial isolations, as in Vipassana (see chapter IV), one should interact, engaging in activities such as singing, dharma sharing, walking or eating. The various practices developed by this tradition actualize Interbeing (see previous chapter) by reinforcing the communitarian dimension of meditation.

I remember that the first time I went to Plum Village it took me a while to be able to sing in a group, a regular activity that usually precedes walking meditation outdoors. In order to be able to sing in public¹⁴² I had to suspend my resistances towards the collective energy of the sangha, displaying my emotions in public. This is a common experience, as exemplified by the following passage:

“I remember [during my first retreat] I couldn’t breathe very well, I was actually feeling quite anxious the first while. I remember going to breakfast the first morning, someone comes over and sits down next to me and I almost felt like snarling. How dare you be so happy?! Rubbish!” (Interview, Paul, March 2011)

In this case, the clash is evident between the joyful environment of Plum Village and the outside world, emotionally embodied by Paul, who had just arrived at the monastery. This mental shut-down (Lawton, 1998), reinforcing the status of the modern, dual self, the *homo clausus*, is clear in Claude Anshin Thomas’ case. He was a soldier who fought in Vietnam and, as many others who served there, went through highly traumatic experiences that profoundly shaped him. When he attended his first retreat in the tradition of Thich Nhat

¹⁴¹ According to a monk I interviewed in the tradition of Plum Village, also experienced in Vipassana, Goenka starts off from the first noble truth, dukkha, or suffering, while Thich Nhat Hanh starts with the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering (see Goenka, 1987).

¹⁴² See Hanh (2001).

Hanh, he decided to protect himself from the surrounding environment in extreme ways, including checking the perimeter where he was supposed to camp:

“I drove to the retreat on my motorcycle. At that time I was riding a black Harley Davidson. I was dressed in a typical fashion for me: black leather jacket, black boots, black helmet, gold mirror glasses, and a red bandana tied around my neck. My style of dress was not exactly warm and welcoming. The way I presented myself was intended to keep people away, because I was scared, really scared.

I arrived at the retreat early so I could check the place out. Before I could think about anything, I walked the perimeter of the whole place: Where are the boundaries? Where are the dangerous places where I'm vulnerable to attack? Coming here thrust me into the unknown, and for me the unknown meant war. And to be with so many people I didn't know was terrifying to me, and the feeling of terror also meant war.” (Thomas, 2004: 39)

After this retreat, Claude went to Plum Village to strengthen his practice of mindfulness, and he even set up booby traps around his camping site to “protect” himself. His experience of initial struggle with the communitarian dimension of practice is a great example of how one resists the retreat assemblage, attempting to maintain the nonmeditative self in control. These resistances were characterized, in Claude's case, by checking the perimeter, setting up booby traps and dressing in an unfriendly way. This is obviously an extreme example – not all participants are Vietnam war veterans – but helps us understand how participants can resort to a diversity of devices that prevent them from letting go of their selves. In psychoanalytic theory, the notion of “defence mechanism” is used “to describe the ego's struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects” (Freud, 1937: 42), including regression, projection, isolation, etc. (Freud, 1937). One could argue that the self and its automatisms are challenged by the retreat assemblage and its psychogeographical reconfigurations, and these episodes of resistance highlight the clash between meditative and nonmeditative paradigms of subjectivity.

VI.II.III THE REBELLIOUS MIND

The two previous examples, reaction to extreme pain and the difficulty in opening up to the community, suggest that the human mind generates a number of resistances towards practices of meditation. Since meditation involves the reconfiguration of human automatisms in radically different settings, characterized by silence and by the reduction of external stimuli, the meditators' minds will produce a vast set of resistances.

In the previous chapter, ordinary states of consciousness were characterized by the pervasiveness of mind-wandering and task-unrelated-thoughts. Nowadays, our minds are being constantly mobilized by technological devices such as televisions, computers, mp3 players and a variety of gadgets. The contemporary technological mind is constantly multitasking: while driving, one is listening to music and calling someone on the phone; while working on the computer, there are various windows opened at the same time, and one is constantly shifting the attention from one thing to another - we could say, inspired by Marcuse (1964), that the contemporary western mind is mobilized by a sort of technological rationality that dominates individuals by controlling their attention, bombarding them with the desire to buy useless commodities and to travel to exotic places¹⁴³.

Instead of following these “negative” views on technology, I am interested in exploring the new realms of experiences opened up by new technological configurations, including meditation. Meditation and sensory deprivation suspend the plethora of environmental stimuli that characterizes western metropolitan life. When the mind is deprived of external objects, it rebels and creates a number of images, memories, desires, thoughts. As Joanna, a Vipassana meditator, puts it:

¹⁴³ Marcuse suggested that “Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.” (Marcuse, 1964: 20)

“As soon as you sit cross legged, you take the precepts, and then you start focusing the mind on the breath, the mind is in a state of turmoil, and wants to push away, and fight ...” (Interview, Joanna, April 2012)

One of my informants remembers that during his first Vipassana retreat he felt like he was watching a movie, his mind was like a big screen preventing him from concentrating on the breath:

“For the first two days ... my mind was like a screen, I was in this big cinema, there were so many different views, like mountains, rocks, and all those sorts of things, coming to sight, and I was wondering what it’s all about ... that was a difficult part, but then it cleared up by the third day.” (Interview, Rob, October 2011)

The modern mind, whose ordinary states of consciousness are characterized by task-unrelated-thoughts, rebels against the practice of meditation, and selves have to struggle with these deep-rooted habits, coming back to the breath and not letting these distractions jeopardize the paradigm shift. Mental rebellion characterizes most of the initial experiences in Vipassana retreats, including hallucinations, which in Japanese Zen are called *makyo* (Kapleau, 1989). In my first Vipassana retreat I saw demonic faces during the evening discourses (probably due to my Catholic upbringing)¹⁴⁴ and in the second one, while I was taking a shower, I saw a human arm coming out of nowhere trying to grab me. Most of the interviewees mentioned that they had problems concentrating and experienced nightmares, visions¹⁴⁵ and old memories coming up.

¹⁴⁴ As I wrote in my field diary “I also suffered from mild hallucinations. During the first days, when they were playing the evening discourse, I would move my gaze from the TV to the assistant teacher’s face and I would see it morph into the face of Satan, with horns, etc.. The same thing happened when I looked at the face of the female assistant teacher (I would see it as somehow alien).” (Field diary, May 2010)

¹⁴⁵ These seem to be fairly common. During my second retreat my mind was projecting a myriad of different faces and I was finding it hard to concentrate. I asked the assistant teachers what to do and they recommended that I open my eyes otherwise it would become impossible to meditate. An interviewee told me that “I started thinking absolutely crazy things, it happens to everyone...there was something that really scared me...I saw an image of my brother and father

Goenka compares these retreats to brain surgery, and one could argue that they are in fact medical operations without general anaesthesia, to make sure that the patient is aware of each and every movement of the scalpel cutting through one's self. Although organized in a radically different fashion, the set of practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh also generate a number of difficulties; however, we are facing a form of applied Buddhism, ideally engaged with everyday activities, without a focus on long periods of sitting meditation – it is a smoother transition. However, it doesn't mean that it does not generate difficulties or struggle. We have seen that adapting to the setting can be problematic, but the interviewees also reported some difficulties with mindfulness itself. Lewis told me that he found impatience as the major resistance towards this technology of the self:

“There is a resistance that for me is fundamental in meditative practices that is impatience, because meditation requires patience, and the first natural resistance is impatience. Impatience towards what? The impatience, at a given moment, to focus on a given object. The impatience of being seated and wanting to walk. The impatience deriving from the fact that the knee hurts and I want the pain to go away. ... I think that the biggest problem is not even the fact that we feel anger or pain, it is the fact that we do not have the patience to face it.” (Interview, Lewis, December 2011)

Impatience drives selves to interrupt mindfulness, preventing them from being in the present moment. When impatience emerges and the mind becomes agitated, the performative apparatus of mindfulness can be mobilized: a gatha is repeated, a bell is activated, one comes back to the breath and feels whatever one is doing (such as brushing the teeth or walking) – using Pickering's performative idiom (Pickering, 1995), one develops a number of strategies of accommodation to progressively become able to practice meditation. As we have seen in chapter IV, this can include recruiting nonhuman allies – such as cushions and pillows – to support a new mode of somatic attention. In other cases, practitioners feel tempted to practice Yoga in order to endure long hours of sitting meditation (see chapter IV). Concerning

merged into one...it was just one person but with traits of my father and brother...I was meditating, in the meditation hall, and I got a little bit scared, I even jumped!” (Interview, Barbara, December 2011)

Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition of mindfulness, the gathas are particularly helpful. As Sal told me:

"I use gathas when I don't feel peace, when I really have to come back to myself, then I use the gatha to help me come back, because sometimes when I'm not at peace...sometimes when something happens, I'm irritated with someone... and...sometimes my mind is thinking about that problem all the time...even if he's not there...in my mind there's a problem all the time, so this gatha helps me come back...arriving...now..." (Interview, Sal, December 2011)

Participants, in initial phases, are constantly struggling with their habitual automatisms, and these strategies of accommodation can help them tune in to forms of meditative agency. These initial difficulties illustrate a clash between paradigms of subjectivity, signalling the enactment of new forms of being in the world. Neil told me that he found working meditation particularly challenging because in the outside world, if he didn't do his work, someone would yell at him:

"[It's] way hard for me to stay mindful while I'm working... the first job I had, the first thing they told me is if you stand and do nothing somebody will come and yell at you...working meditation is very difficult, I always lose my mindfulness...I work to get the job done..." (Interview, Neil, February 2011)

This passage illustrates a clash between the paradigm of subjectivity enacted in Plum Village (where they even have the so-called lazy days) and the outside world, as well as the fact that one's struggle with mindfulness is always conditioned by life circumstances, past experiences and the mental set. Some other practices, such as walking meditation outside, seem to do exactly the opposite of sitting meditation, "obliging" the subject to maintain mindfulness while he or she is being exposed to the environment, in order to transform the meditator's Umwelt. According to Ethan:

"It's very easy to get distracted because you're walking outside, you can walk around, look around, and... then your focus can easily...you can get lost easily, you know." (Interview, Ethan, February 2011)

There are many other examples that could be provided to explore some of the initial difficulties with mindfulness. Since these practices of meditation are always applied to particular actions, the typical troubles arising during sitting meditation (commonly experienced with Vipassana) are extended to all the other practices. The challenge is to fully engage in the activity, not getting distracted by thoughts but accepting whatever is happening and using the breath and gathas as anchors to come back to the present moment. Since the mind is not trained to be still and present, the practitioner will struggle. Whenever mindlessness arises, one comes back to the breath – if the nature of the mind is to wander, the nature of the practitioner is to come back, over and over again.

The initial resistances to meditation highlight the clash between modern and nonmodern paradigms of the self. Meditation is supported by the breath, particular ways of reorganizing one's posture and a variety of associations with nonhumans, inner gazes and settings. These assemblages enact a version of the human mind (present, not flooded by thoughts and aware of particular objects) that contrasts with ordinary states of consciousness, characterized by daydreaming, leaning towards the past and the future. The ordinary mind is in a permanent state of turmoil, eager for inputs from the five senses; instead of being present, it jumps from one thought to another, and this flow creates a constant background noise. William James, while reflecting on human consciousness, suggested that "A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described." (James, 2007: 240). David Hume also recognized the dynamic and impermanent nature of the human mind, suggesting that it should be understood as a theatre: "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations." (Hume, 1888: 253)

One could argue that the modern self is overpowered by this impermanence, preventing it from being in the present moment by constantly projecting new thoughts, memories and images. Instead of being fully present, one seems to regurgitate the same old endless river, identifying with it and blindly believing that the mind is the self. The modern self is overpowered by its

history, preventing it from experiencing the world as novelty. As Nietzsche suggested, “there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.” (Nietzsche, 1997: 62)

These struggles of agency, including pain, discomfort and unease, help the self to de-identify with the stream of thoughts, framing experience in new ways and allowing new ways of perceiving the self and the world to emerge, new programs of action (and of perception) enacted by the practice of meditation.

VI.III THE FEELING OF MEDITATION

Initial experiences with meditation can be challenging, signalling the shift between paradigms of the self, and Vipassana and Zen practices promote particular configurations of experience that are distinct from ordinary states of consciousness. As we have seen in the previous chapter, these technologies of the self differ in terms of scope. The “object” of Goenka’s Vipassana is the physical body and its sensations, while with Thich Nhat Hanh we find a plethora of objects of meditation. In both cases, the “aim” is the establishment of a new mode of existence that can be equanimity, in the case of Vipassana, or mindfulness, in the case of Zen. The repetition of meditative performances in relatively controlled environments leads to new ways of being and particular configurations of experience.

Since Vipassana and Zen display different modes of experiential transformation, I will analyze these technologies separately.

VI.III.I ANAPANA – APPROACHING MENTAL SILENCE

What is it like to practice Vipassana? First, one does not start immediately with Vipassana but with Anapanasati, or awareness of the breath. Initially this

practice is met with an incredible resistance: the goal is to create a foundation for Vipassana, to still the mind, making it sharp, precise and concentrated. The type of Anapana practiced in these retreats involves focusing on the skin around the lip/nose areas (as we have seen in the previous chapter), and most of my interviewees report an increased awareness of these areas. As Tim told me:

“I felt my moustache moving, then I felt just the skin itself, then I felt the breath on the skin and then just the skin. I was just working with the size of a pea on the upper lip...” (Interview, Tim, April 2011)

Anapana increases the feeling of the object of concentration, and it also can still and calm the mind. Anapana is a propaedeutic tool for the practice of Vipassana, calming the mind. Rebecca recollects what she calls “mental silence” when she practices Anapana in longer Vipassana retreats:

“I think it’s when my mind has been quietest, when I’ve been on courses. It’s like you’re in silence, but sometimes you start to approach mental silence, especially when you’re doing Anapana for ten days, on a thirty day course or a week of Anapana on a twenty day course...you approach mental silence and the thoughts come up every five or ten minutes or something and you’re like...oh, there’s a thought, and then it’s gone again, and then there’s a big gap of silence...and it’s like...then you’re able to observe more, just in a much quieter kind of...when you go from this Anapana into Vipassana. (Interview, Rebecca, April 2012)

Anapana increases concentration, suspending the flow of thoughts that characterize ordinary states of consciousness. Practicing Anapana continuously in a particular setting elicits nonmodern experiences - the self is no longer overpowered by thoughts, and silence emerges.

VI. III.II THE SUBTLE BODY OF VIPASSANA

Anapana is not the final meditative performance, but rather a way of tuning the mind for Vipassana. While practicing Anapana, the sensations felt between the nostrils and the upper lip can progressively allow the emergence of the subtle feeling we introduced in the previous chapter.

The practitioners describe the subtle feeling by resorting to a variety of words and expressions, such as tingling, flowing water, pins and needles, static electricity, energy, vibrations, etc.. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Goenka tells practitioners that this subtle feeling is linked to the *kalapas*, the subatomic constituents of matter, according to the standpoint psychology of Vipassana. The continuity of practice may generate experiences of subtle energies, confirming the subtle anatomy of Vipassana. An interviewee told me that when he was practicing Vipassana a sort of a pattern was established, and these sensations would slowly progress to various body parts, “infecting” them with tingling vibrations. However, some parts of the body were blank, or deprived of subtle sensations:

“A pattern would be established...for instance, a pattern in the face... that would spread from the nose, the central part of the face, spreading in all directions, radiating something from there in all directions and radiating something like ... almost like if small drops of water were being spread out by the wind in the air...So they would radiate... it was sort of a pulsation of these sensations, like if there were hundreds of channels at the surface of the skin that would originate in the centre of the face and then would spread out through all my face, the neck, the cheeks, the chin, the ears...so, that was what I felt in my face and that was constant... in my arms there was a different pattern...in a more random fashion...but also of subtle sensations that would appear and stay for a long time...in the rest of my body there are plenty of blank zones, or solid sensations...or more sporadic subtle sensations...” (Interview, Adam, December 2011)

This passage is a good description of what happens when one is practicing Vipassana. One usually encounters subtle sensations in some parts of the body and gross sensations (such as pain) in other parts. Most of the practitioners report that it is easier to feel these subtle sensations in some parts of the body: “good” areas are the top of the head and the face, the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet. As the practice progresses, it may also happen that a subtle sensation develops above gross sensations - the mind becomes more finely tuned and is even able to “pick” these sensations in addition to the feeling of pain, for instance. The experience of Vipassana should be accompanied by the awareness of impermanence, *anicca*. As one is scanning the body, from feet to head and vice-versa, one encounters a diversity of sensations while ideally maintaining equanimity, detached observation. While dealing with physical

sensations (whether subtle or not) in a trained, equanimous way, one should be able to understand that reaction is produced conceptually, that the reactive state is a construction, and that with the practice of Vipassana it is possible to have a different experience of the self. As Maxwell puts it:

“You begin to examine your physical sensations and to realize that most of your reactivity to pain happens on a conceptual level, and that actually pain is conceptual ... you begin to see really...pain is a certain intensity of feeling, and if you drop the load of the conceptual level you can actually go into the pain in your knee, and if you focus your attention on it you’ll feel a higher or stronger frequency of vibrating in this kind of tingling, and realize that what is actually manifesting on a gross level as pain is actually a much more intense cluster of this kind of tingling energy, and by putting your awareness, directly on the pain, it will disperse.” (Interview, Maxwell, February 2011)

By refining the mental ability to notice these subtle sensations, progressively developing a new somatic mode of attention, one enacts a different version of the body, opposed to the aesthetic experience characterized by the multitude of gross sensations such as pain, itching, cold, heat, perspiration, etc.. These may continue to be felt, but are progressively accompanied by subtle sensations, due to the refinement of the meditative mind. Advanced meditators can eventually discriminate these subtle sensations according to the five types of constituents of matter (see chapter V). While they practice, they can more easily “find” the subtle sensation accompanying a gross one, eventually identifying the type of constituent it represents:

“Passing the awareness over a particular part with a particular sensation, it doesn’t matter, but very often there will be a sensation, a flow above it, because that sensation is always there, but the mind can’t feel it. So, by passing over a gross sensation, there may or may not be tingling present over the surface of that. And a visual image that I often will get when I’m having these experiences is almost like a river, and what you might have is maybe a bolder or...of a rock, and the water is just skimming over the top of the rock, in this river, in this stream, and I feel that’s almost what I’m experiencing in myself, is this strong earth element, which is the pain in the knee, the strong painful element, and then as the river kind of...the path of that river is just kind of undulating, washing over the top of this little rock.” (Interview, Joanna, April 2012)

Joanna's words suggest that Vipassana, as a form of political anatomy (Foucault, 1995), enacts a nonmodern version of the body, filled with vibrations (see chapter V). A relevant dimension of Vipassana, therefore, is to transform one's experience of the self and the world, as I suggested in chapter II. Influenced by the notion of Umwelt, I stated that meditation transforms the experience of the environment, fostering new associations (including the submission to a new psychogeography) that reconfigure subjectivity. In that sense, one could argue that meditation involves forms of attunement, a mode of engagement developed "between a personal body and his/her living ambience, both internal and external" (Nagatomo, 1992: xxv). Meditation allows selves to tune in to forms of agency that reshape their bodily experience. This fosters the emergence of a new type of reality, and the pervasiveness of subtle sensations (accompanying painful areas) can also help the meditator to endure the sitting periods with an increased sense of equanimity, since subtle sensations are more pleasant than the habitual feeling of pain.

This different way of performing the body is allowed by continuous practice, fostering the emergence of a subtle anatomy that replaces the apparent solidity of the body. This is an affordance prompted by Vipassana and involves a new hermeneutics of the self, including the ability to associate sensations with specific constituents of matter. One becomes aware of this subtlety and establishes a new way of being – equanimity – based on the impermanence of sensations. As I suggest in the following section, this process is accompanied by the emergence of a variety of memories, sometimes associated with particular sensations.

VI.III.III VIPASSANA AND MEMORIES

As one meditates, the mind brings up old, deep rooted memories, eventually disturbing one's concentration. Goenka often argues that the body stores *sankharas*, reactions to life events. In the previous chapter we understood these *sankharas* as automatisms, habitual ways of reacting to life

events. Although some of the advanced users I interviewed had a problem with the notion of *sankharas* as embodied memories of past reactions (they would rather associate *sankharas* with mental formations and dispositions, sometimes even refusing to use this concept or stating that it took them time to “believe” in such a thing)¹⁴⁶, the practice of Vipassana triggers the emergence of memories that we had long forgotten¹⁴⁷, often accompanied by strong sensations. In my second Vipassana retreat I had an experience that I managed to register in my field diary:

“Lying on my bed at night, observing sensations, I came across a knot in my stomach accompanied by a memory of watching a rotting dog when I was 7 – I remembered the stench of death and how it triggered an unbearable fear of dogs and of dead animals, perhaps augmenting the fear of death and decay. I remember that after we saw the dog (I was with some friends, walking in the woods) we got lost and it took us over an hour to find the track again. This was a very deep rooted memory that hadn’t emerged for the past 15 years perhaps.” (Field Diary, November 2011)

After this experience I felt much lighter, and was able to sleep properly for the first time since the beginning of the retreat. This episode reminds us of the role of the body in maintaining and carrying our life history, the role of body memory:

“The underlying carrier of our life history, and eventually of our whole being-in-the-world. It comprises not only the evolved dispositions of our perceiving and behaving, but also the memory cores that connect us most intimately with our biographical past.” (Fuchs, 2012: 20)

The experience I went through suggests that there are particular ways of allowing these memories to come to surface and to transform one’s dispositions. Different body memories emerge when regular automatisms are

¹⁴⁶ Goenka, in one of the evening discourses, actually mentions that Robert Hoover, a scientist who practiced meditation with U Ba Khin, found it quite hard to “believe” in the “bank account” model of the mind, as put by the Burmese meditation master (see chapter V); however, and according to Goenka, when he returned to the U.S. he felt incredibly lighter, like if a burden had been lifted.

¹⁴⁷ See Pagis (2008: 132) for an interesting example of an advanced meditator associating a particular sensation with a memory, supposedly from a past life.

transformed. Merleau-Ponty, in fact, suggested that habits, memory and the body are deeply entangled¹⁴⁸, and what he called “knowledge in the hands” illustrates such process – someone who frequently uses a keyboard or a cell phone becomes familiarized with this process of bodily learning and memory at the digital level. Technologies of the self, as hermeneutics of the subject, imply new ways of interpreting and dealing with one’s past. In other formations, such as hypnosis, psychoanalysis or even holotropic breathwork (Grof and Grof, 2010), memories are a common denominator concerning processes of transformation. An interesting concept that allows us to explore the links between technologies of the self and the emergence of memories is the notion of “biogram” (Massumi, 2002). The biogram is linked to a bodily memory of movement that is kinaesthetic and aligned to proprioception (Blackman, 2010: 177). Vipassana, as a somatic mode of attention, requires meditators to move their awareness throughout the body, and these memories emerge as the result of a different way of attending to one’s self, disrupting embodied dispositions that are crystallized by one’s life-history.

The following example, shared by Tim, exemplifies how the emergence of a particular memory was triggered by the practice of Vipassana, and how it was associated with a particular sensation - sickness:

“I sort of had the insight ... that memories, emotional memories are stored in the body and while I was sitting there my legs were falling asleep and I was trying to do the adhitanna, just trying to do that, it wasn’t working terribly, but my legs fell asleep and I felt sick, I felt physically sick, I tried to keep on going, and I had this strange notion crop up in my mind...I saw myself sitting in the back of my parents car going on holiday on a hot summers day and getting traveller sick...I said...ohhh...I feel sick because the leg aches remind me of being in a car and as soon as a kind of...as soon as I relieved it...the legs still fucking hurt, but I wasn’t sick anymore.” (Interview, Tim, April 2011)

¹⁴⁸ According to Merleau-Ponty, “To know how to type is not ... to know the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one, which is set in motion by the letter as it comes before our eye. If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what then is it? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort.” (Merleau-Ponty: 2000: 166)

This example reinforces the assumption that sensations (including pain) are not merely physical/biological, they are in fact coupled with particular modes of attention; the inner gaze of Vipassana, through the transformation of awareness, can alter embodied associations - in Tim's case, the association between sitting and feeling sick was broken.

Our automatisms are maintained without much effort because through repetition they become embodied. They are memorized, and without thinking too much about it our hands reach the keyboard and start typing or we close our eyes when a gruesome scene is being broadcasted on the TV. Memory plays a relevant role in the maintenance of automatisms, and Vipassana transforms these dispositions, implementing new ways of being. The installation of a new automatism – Vipassana – clashes with the modern paradigm of subjectivity that separates body and mind, and this transition to a new version of selfhood can trigger memories of episodes that were responsible for certain associations, such as feeling sick after sitting for too long. Vipassana alters these associations, reinforcing the role of the body in the development of new ways of being, suggesting that “it is the whole organism, not just the brain, that makes sense of the world.” (Colombetti, 2012: 8)

VI.III.IV THE EXPERIENCE OF MINDFULNESS

The set of practices promoted by Thich Nhat Hanh include a variety of technologies that aim at applying mindfulness in virtually all realms of existence, allowing selves to act mindfully in daily life – instead of enduring long hours of sitting meditation in isolation, one interacts, talks, eats and walks frequently. Initially, I believed that it would be possible to analyze the experience of mindfulness by fragmenting it into “blocks” - I thought that different practices (sitting, walking, eating, etc) would open up different experiential realms; however, after interviewing practitioners and deepening my own practice, I realized that it would be more useful to characterize the experience of

mindfulness in a holistic fashion, as a general art of living implying a set of common and ubiquitous experiential changes.

VI.III.V AWARENESS OF ACTIVITY

Meditators report a heightened sense of being aware of what they are doing, and they frequently contrast mindful performances with what they would do in the outside world, revealing a contrast between meditative and nonmeditative mindsets. For Ted, awareness is the common denominator in all practices of mindfulness:

“There’s no difference between sitting or not sitting. You can say that the sitting that we just did, it ends when the bell goes, but in this practice, how I understand it, it does not end when we stand up, we still have...it’s about the awareness of what you are doing. We don’t walk differently, we don’t work differently, we don’t eat differently, we don’t sit differently, what we do is not different, how we do it is different. And how do we do that? To be aware of what you are doing. I am sitting now with you and I know I’m sitting here... most of the time we are distracted by our thinking. We are thinking...oh yeah that girl is coming tonight and I’m going to say this to her, yesterday that guy said this, what an asshole...I’m gonna...so we are...our bodies are here...sitting, but our mind is in Paris, or in the future, or the past. So all these practices that we have here, the basis is the awareness of what we are doing, it doesn’t matter what it is that we are doing, it’s just that we are aware...” (Interview, Ted, February 2011)

For Ted, mindfulness is about being present, not being distracted by thinking, the future or the past, the characteristics of ordinary states of consciousness. Sal, in a similar tone, even resorts to the image of the zombie to characterize normal, nonmeditative states:

“Yeah, it’s like how you can be a pilot for yourself, you’re not a zombie...how not to be a zombie... when you breathe you know that you’re alive and your soul is automatically back.” (Interview, Sal, December 2011)

This heightened awareness is linked to the performative modifications operated by mindfulness, and a good example of that is walking meditation. Brad's reflections on walking meditation provide a good example of what can occur phenomenologically during the practice of meditation in movement:

“In the moment you start becoming aware of that...of what's going on... you make this deep imprint with your feet, every time you step you become very aware of how....how your body is moving, how your body is in harmony, how you feel comfort or discomfort, the way you walk and...how it brings you a lot of joy” (Interview, Brad, February 2011)

The experience described by Brad should be extended to all dimensions of life, allowing the subject to be aware of the present action and moment. This dynamic and continuous mobilization of mindfulness can be compared to the flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the flow “is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008: 6). However, with mindfulness there is no pursuit – the present moment is the only moment, and there is a phenomenological continuity throughout all activities. Moreover, some authors have criticized the notion of flow because it conceptualizes affect as bounded to individual subjects, whereas affect should be understood as a relational phenomenon (Blackman, 2010; Venn, 2010) that emerges within particular assemblages, including meditation retreats.

By transforming the regular pace, the “self” becomes an object of mindfulness; by calming down, enjoying the present moment, relaxing and generally acting slowly, practitioners report instances of “opening up” emotionally. This is linked to the second major aspect of mindfulness.

VI.III.VI AWARENESS OF EMOTIONS

Most of the practitioners I interviewed mentioned the importance of emotions, of mindfulness allowing them to experience their self in different ways, of unfolding their selves (Metzner, 1986). If, in Vipassana, we face a sort

of meditative suspension where everything lies at the ground level of sensations, with mindfulness there are many expressions or doors that can be explored in order to cultivate meditation, and emotions seem to play an important role here. As Paul told me, recollecting his first retreat,

“I really noticed that mindfulness, because you just have to be with yourself, and life, it just opened up things, and I found myself feeling a lot more than I felt in a long time. And usually quite positive, wholesome emotions. I felt my heart was just opening up to people. And that just came by naturally... with spontaneity...” (Interview, Paul, March 2011)

The opening up of things, as put by Paul, is connected with an increased sensitivity shared by most of the meditators. A dharma teacher I interviewed even reported that, in today’s world, this sensitivity can be quite challenging. One could argue that there are strong connections between this practice of mindfulness and new age models of subjectivity (Heelas, 1996) and their focus on expressivism, the so called subjective turn (we shouldn’t forget that singing and “enjoying” nature are part of Plum Village’s array of somehow “romantic” practices, see Taylor, 1989). However, what is at stake is not the celebration of the self but one of the very early processes of transformation deployed by this tradition. As put by Sean,

“My feeling is...the first stage of this practice is to take care of your...your emotions...a lot of us...a lot of people...specially from the West, I think, come to develop a lot of emotional disorders, often psychological problems and not knowing how to take care of emotions... yeah, that’s another thing, I think that skill.. in the West... no one ever teaches you...nobody ever taught me how to ... I feel that this practice gives you these tools to, first to identify and name all the different emotions that occur internally, in my internal world, and then a constructive way of relating to them ...” (Interview, Sean, February 2011)

This process of becoming aware of emotions is not necessarily peaceful. It is common to cry and to experience a wide range of difficult emotions while attending retreats. As Jane told me,

“That tight shell breaks open and then you often go through tears and a releasing of the heart...it’s often to do with kind of constrictions...sadness... in some ways something that obstructed my being...and my spirit, way back in the past.” (Interview, Jane, April 2011)

The notion of repression is of the utmost importance in psychoanalysis, referring to those ideas that have “been pushed aside, or driven from conscious awareness” (Billig, 1999: 15). One could suggest, in a rather simplistic way, that in the modern, outside world, emotions are “repressed” and, when people are able to join the retreat, these come to surface. This line of thought could be reinforced by resorting to Goffman’s (Goffman, 1969) performative selves, constantly hiding their “authenticity” from public scrutiny and playing certain social roles. However, contemporary societies do not suppress emotions, they actually play an important role in marketing and politics. The role of mindfulness is not to unveil these repressed emotions but to be able to become aware of them, developing relevant tools to take care of them, the non-verbal humanities that, as suggested by Huxley, address the aesthetic dimension of one’s existence (Huxley, 1963).

VI.III.VII AWARENESS OF THOUGHTS

A relevant feature of mindfulness practices is to become aware of thought patterns, including the possibility of turning them into more wholesome ones. Sean told me that he suffered from some psychological problems before coming to Plum Village, including depression and anxiety. According to him, meditation is highly beneficial because he can actually slow down the flow of thoughts, observing and then turning them into more positive, less destructive mental formations:

“Meditation ... has the capacity to slow down the flow of thoughts ... so I’m able to see more clearly what...what is that I’m thinking... before I came here I actually didn’t know what was going on in my mind. I knew I was suffering but I wasn’t able to see clearly the content of my thoughts, on a moment to moment basis, and meditation to me has given that clarity of seeing more or less on a moment to moment basis what I’m actually thinking and what the consequences of thinking like that are. ... it slows down my thought patterns and ... gives me an opportunity to change them, so when I can see they’re negative and I see the negative thinking leads to more suffering, and the negativity breeds more negativity, I can

actually start doing something to bring more ... more positive thoughts into my mind ... and nourish the positive mental states in me rather than just exclusively the negative, which was what I was doing.” (Interview, Sean, February 2011)

We know from meditation research that mindfulness has a variety of psychological applications (see chapter II), including dealing with stress. By explaining how this technology of the self transforms his mental assemblage, Sean also highlights the connections between the therapeutic and the spiritual. The notion of healing is of the utmost importance to Thich Nhat Hanh, and it is not understood in a normalizing fashion (Foucault, 2003) but rather as a process of inner work to lessen human suffering. The humanist critique of contemporary meditation (McMahan, 2008) suggests that, nowadays, Buddhism has been co-opted by the subjective turn (Taylor, 1989). Lasch, in his critique of narcissism, even argues that:

“The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” (Lasch, 1979: 7)

Lasch suggests that nowadays therapy and spirituality have merged¹⁴⁹. However, I cannot agree with him for the following reasons: first, he displays a humanist understanding of anthropotechnics, believing that technologies of the self can be explained by major social or cultural forces, ignoring the material and performative powers that enact novel experiences; second, he seems to ignore that meditation, informed by Buddhist philosophy, actually deals directly with the issue of human suffering, and it has done so for the past 2500 years, which means that personal and psychological transformations are not a mere symptom of contemporary capitalist and narcissist societies but part of legitimate and long-standing systems of practice; finally, Lasch’s criticism seems to prevent him from conceiving strong alternatives to contemporary

¹⁴⁹ In a similar tone, Jeremy Carrette argues that, in contemporary neoliberal societies, religion has been “psychologized”, and he elaborates on the important role played by humanistic psychology in transforming religion and spirituality into psychological techniques, focusing on the work of Abraham Maslow (Carrette, 2007).

subject-positions: instead of analyzing their potential, he rather classifies them according to *a priori* generalizations without actually studying, practicing or experiencing them¹⁵⁰.

Thich Nhat Hanh has lived in the West for more than three decades, and he is skilled in translating Buddhist principles into contemporary contexts. In the previous chapter we have seen that the language he uses can be highly kitsch in order to allow westerners to engage in mindfulness. Some of the practices, such as what is commonly called “dharma sharing”, have some similarities with western psychology, including the encounter groups (Rogers, 1970). Hanh’s approach aims not at developing narcissism but to allow participants to apply mindfulness in everyday life situations, including emotions and thoughts.

In Vipassana, reactions are transformed through the equanimous observation of sensations; regarding mindfulness, habit patterns can be transformed via a variety of gates, such as the observation of thoughts. The aim is to create a de-identification with the thought that arises; not by rejecting but by embracing it, treating “it” as an old friend. This process is eloquently put by Paul:

“Maybe some anxious thought comes up and I just smile to it and it’s no problem, you know, I say “Hey, there’s an anxious thought, hello, how are you today? Lovely to see you my old friend”. That sort of clarity, that strength of being able to do that, whereas before you would react to everything in your head.” (Interview, Paul, March 2011)

This new ability to deal with arising thoughts creates an increasing sense of space. Space and spaciousness were recurrent themes during the interviews. Space was often understood as the ability to overcome habit patterns, avoiding normal reactions, or even part of a broader conceptualization of the self, entangled with other humans and nonhumans; in sum, space becomes deeply

¹⁵⁰ Lasch’s cynicism goes even further when he “attacks” the New Age movement, stating that “New Age spirituality, no less than technological utopianism, is rooted in primary narcissism. If the technological fantasy seeks to restore the infantile illusion of self-sufficiency, the New Age movement seeks to restore the illusion of symbiosis, a feeling of absolute oneness with the world.” (Lasch, 1979: 245)

linked to Interbeing, suggesting that mindfulness reconfigures the connections between self and others.

VI.III.VII INTERCONNECTION

Some practitioners report feeling a deepened sense of connection with other humans and nonhumans, reinforcing the contrast with modern, dualist paradigms of subjectivity. Meditation fosters the development of feelings of empathy with other humans and nonhumans (see Sweet and Johnson, 1990; Kristeller and Johnson, 2005). I found it interesting how deeply and fast I developed emotional bonds with other retreatants, easing the process of recruiting interviewees. When the interviews took place, the practitioners often framed them as a form of “sharing”, similar to what happens during “dharma sharing” (see chapter V).

Michael, a highly experienced dharma teacher in this tradition, mentions this sense of connection as one of the most relevant aspects of mindfulness practice:

“Very broadly speaking I think a sense of...a sense of space... things not being cluttered...so...sort of clearing out the business of your life... that we often experience in the modern world... a deepening level of insight into how things inter-connect...and a sense of warmth and connectedness with the other people on the retreat I think, is...the key elements of what I experienced on the retreats.” (Interview, Michael, May 2011)

This sense of inter-connection is expressed in a variety of ways: it can contribute to transform and heal difficult personal relationships through the development of empathy; it increases the appreciation of “nature”; it can support dietary choices, such as vegetarianism, by appreciating this interconnectedness between all beings and even permits the emergence of a decentred, nonmodern sense of the self, allowing subjects to connect with ancestors. One could argue that we are facing the development of what Romain Rolland described, in his letters to Sigmund Freud, as the oceanic feeling or the oceanic

sentiment. According to Freud, “it is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (Freud, 1961: 12). Freud was quite cynical about such experiences, considering them regressive and narcissistic (Freud, 1961; Gleig, 2010); similarly, Lasch (1979) suggested that neo-Gnosticism is a form of narcissism and Heelas considers environmentalism and deep ecology, linked to the New Age Movement¹⁵¹, as a by-product of de-traditionalized and de-territorialized selves. However, I think that it is more interesting to analyze this phenomenon (this spaciousness and oceanic feeling) as the de-stabilization of the *homo clausus*, the skin-encapsulated ego, corresponding to the suspension of the modern self. We will see, in the following section, how mystical experiences illustrate a radically different, non-modern paradigm of the self. By generating a feeling of spaciousness and involvement with one’s surroundings, mindfulness thus becomes a technology of interconnectedness, installing new automatisms that transform one’s Umwelt, eventually allowing practitioners to be in the environment in different, nonmodern ways. For instance, Bob told me that:

“I can arrive more quickly in nature, and feel at one in that home. I remember sometimes in the past I went hiking a whole day in the mountains and maybe...seven or eight hours, and the first six hours I hiked, I’m in my mind... thinking about home, thinking about...wandering around, and maybe by the end of the day there’s....half an hour where I feel I have really arrived....open for the landscape, to perceive it, and with mindfulness you can increase that.” (Interview, Bob, February 2011)

According to Bob, mindfulness makes him more aware of nature, being able to enjoy the environment without the mind wandering that characterizes Ordinary States of Consciousness. In the long run, subjects can actually experience the total dissolution of the self and experience novelty, and the role of the following section is to analyze a number of experiences that challenge the modern self.

¹⁵¹ Heelas, reflecting on Deep Ecology and ecological consciousness, stated that “The sense of connection which is then experienced with nature thus provides the basis – in ecological consciousness – for determining what counts as right action.” (Heelas, 1996: 85) We will provide a stronger account of the connections between Thich Nhat Hanh’s project of the self and deep ecology in chapter VIII.

VI.IV MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

These various instances of experiential transformation elicit a paradigm shift from the dual, skin-encapsulated ego, constantly dominated by thoughts, towards nonmodern selfhood. A fundamental element of meditation is the emergence of experiences that we could coin as mystical, transpersonal, holotropic or even as peak experiences (Maslow, 1964). For the sake of clarity, I will use the term “mystical experiences”, following William James’ work on this topic. According to James, a fundamental aspect of these experiences concerns the suspension of the boundaries between self and other, the individual and the absolute. In sum, these experiences can suspend the dualistic split between individuals and the world:

“This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed.” (James, 2002: 324)

According to James, these states display four relevant characteristics: Ineffability (they are hard or even impossible to describe with words, see Bataille (1988) for an interesting reflection on inner experience); Noetic quality (these states generate insights that are usually unreachable by the “normal mind”); Transiency (these states are not sustained for a long time) and Passivity (in these states, the subject feels as if his own will is “suspended”, and a higher power emerges) (James, 2002: 295).

These mystical states are transformations of consciousness, and they open up new paradigms for human existence beyond ordinary states, escaping even verbal attempts to conceptualize them. As Groff and Bennet suggest:

“Through our consciousnesses, we can transcend time and space, cross boundaries separating us from various animal species, experience processes in the botanical kingdom and in the inorganic world, and even

explore mythological and other realities that we previously did not know existed.” (Grof and Bennet, 1993: 18)

Transformations of consciousness are not limited to meditation: the consumption of psychedelics, bodywork, music in ritualized environments or even certain spaces (such as the isolation tank) can elicit radical changes in self-perception. These mystical states reflect particular conceptualizations of human existence, such as impermanence and Interbeing; they are *noetic* in the sense that, by going through them, realities that were unknown or only discursive become experiential and alive, signalling the passage from conceptual to embodied knowledge (Pagis, 2010). Following post-humanist STS, these experiences are affordances allowed by the devices of meditation, phenomena that constitute “a new way to perceive that just happened to manifest itself in a new material situation” (Pickering, 2001: 177). Considering that meditation practice requires new performative, spatial, regulatory and material arrangements (as chapters IV and V have shown), nonmodern experiences emerge through novel associations and bodily arrangements, contrasting with modern and dual ontologies.

An excellent example is the experience of dissolution. Eric Lerner, an American traveller who practiced Vipassana during the seventies, provides an interesting description of the state of *Bangha*, dissolution, in his book “Journey of Insight Meditation”:

“Very quickly I was aware of my entire body as a field of particles, tiny, tiny particles, disappearing, disappearing before I could even say, here they are. Then it seemed as if my mind was spread out through my entire body. Anywhere I focused I felt this single mist like sensation, and my mind felt as if it was being pulled into this fluid. Should I let go? My attention seemed to gather just below my breastbone, where I often experienced the most violent sensations of all. But that area was quiet now, too. Everything was quiet. For a moment I was confused. It didn’t feel like the tingling sensation of dissolution, *anicca*, impermanence. But it grew stronger and I felt pulled toward it.

I was aware of the uniqueness of this sensation, and I wondered how I could describe it. Then as my mind started to phrase the answer, the conceptualizing stopped. The jaws of my chattering mind flapped open in silence. The commentator disappeared.” (Lerner, 1977: 105)

Eric's experience was of the emergence of the body as a flow of vibrations, tiny little kalapas, as the subtle anatomy of Vipassana indeed indicates (see chapter V). Eric also reports being "pulled" into the fluid, indicating the passivity of the psychonaut, suggesting that he had to suspend his will in order to tune in to new realms of agency (Pickering, 1995); the novelty of such experience disrupts the habitual hermeneutical function of the mind: Eric is not sure if this is *anicca*, but the discriminative mind has vanished - there is no more conceptualization. At no point of this description Eric resorts to the term *Bangha*; however, the phenomenology he shared seems to indicate that it was the case, at least taking into account Goenka's description of such a state (see Goenka, 1998).

Tim, more acquainted with Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, uses a more complex language to describe his experience. He told me that he experienced dissolution at least twice:

"On day ten of the first one [his first Vipassana retreat] I got a slight sensation of *Bangha*, and it felt like...it was on day ten, we were talking, I just had a really nice lunch, and I just felt very light and sattvic in yogic terms, just pure being, and the sensation was like being in a jet when it takes off, and then a vibration, that was very strong, permeated my whole living world...it was fantastic... the second time...day five of the second sitting, I got that again, in the evening, and I was so shocked that it had come on, and I...it was about fifty five minutes in, I know this because I looked at my watch just after it...I was completely racked in pain, it was excruciating, but I felt like a slight sensation of being in a lift, I just felt the ground pushing up beneath me and I was like...ok...remain equanimous, remain with equanimity, stay with the breathing and the sensations on the body, and then it was like the event horizon from 2001, everything in my body felt like it was miles and miles wide, and it was just light, just different colours of light, flashing up, everything was changing, and above that was my consciousness, as if my consciousness was looking down into my body, and I felt like I was having an out of body experience, and I shat myself [Laughs] it was...oh...so I opened my eyes and that was it, I couldn't get that back." (Interview, Tim, April 2011)

Tim's description illustrates the deeply transient nature of bodily dissolution and also the fact that it seems to emerge out of nowhere, it is not controlled in a linear fashion by the practitioner, indicating his passivity. The

radically *different* nature of Bangha was particularly frightening, but it gave Tim a strong feeling of impermanence due to the feeling of vibrations and the apparent dissolution of the habitual experience of the body. According to Goenka (1998), Bangha is a test because equanimity can be compromised by these pleasant subtle sensations. Although it can be dangerous, in the sense that it seems to multiply subtle sensations (that can generate attachment), it also confirms the anatomo-politics (Foucault, 1995) that structures this project of subjectivity – that the body is nothing more than an assemblage of vibrations, *kalapas*, experienced as subtle sensations. In order to tune in to Bangha, practitioners have to transform their automatisms, focusing on sensations, accepting whatever arises, increasing their passivity, and eventually these experiences can be revealed, allowing them to be affected by meditative agency.

These two experiences allowed selves to enter nonmodern realms of experience, usually not accessible to the nonmeditative, ordinary mind, suspending dualist beliefs about the self and the world. Maxwell, a Vipassana practitioner, reported an experience where he had the feeling of losing his sense of self (one could argue that it was an experience of *anatta*, no-self), during his first course:

“On the 7th day I...had this very intense nondual experience where for some period I...only a few seconds...but I was very aware that...actually the image that came up was that I was a giant vat of jello, and that I was...myself had cordoned off as a small sliver and that it would've felt completely absurd that I'd differentiated myself from the surrounding jello. But more than that...I had the impression that all the nondual experiences I'd had on psychoactive drugs were only the skewed reflections of the true state which was what I was experiencing.” (Interview, Maxwell, February 2011)

Maxwell told me that shortly before the retreat he had experienced a bad trip on *salvia divinorum*¹⁵², and going on retreat was also a chance to clear up his mind. The phenomenon of nonduality he went through was accompanied by a particular image that exemplifies the suspension of separateness between

¹⁵² *Salvia divinorum* is a plant with psychedelic properties, see <https://www.erowid.org/plants/salvia/salvia.shtml> (Retrieved: 13/09/2013)

self and others. One could speculate on the role of jello as the mediator between the mystical realm and the perceiving mind, arguing that it represents fluidity and its touch can elicit threshold sensations, usually difficult to classify and to deal with (Douglas, 2006), therefore contributing to the general strangeness that characterized the experience. The fact that he was relatively familiar with psychedelics helped him deal with the experience of nonduality, and allowed him to compare it with what happens when one does certain drugs¹⁵³.

Maxwell's experience has some similarities with a particularly transformative episode described by Thich Nhat Hanh in his autobiography:

"In that moment, the sense of myself as an entity among other entities disappeared. I knew that this insight did not arise from disappointment, despair, fear, desire or ignorance. A veil lifted silently and effortlessly. ... At that moment, I had the deep feeling that I had *returned*. My clothes, my shoes, even the essence of my being had vanished, and I was carefree as a grasshopper pausing on a blade of grass." (Hanh, 1999: 85)

This example is interesting for various reasons. First, we are facing the suspension of Elias' *homo clausus*: Hanh states that the sense of separateness between "self" and "others" vanished as a result of the meditative insight. Second, instead of exclusively representing an altered state of consciousness it suggests that the ontology of the dual self is a construction, one of multiple possible enactments (Hanh wrote that he had "returned"). Finally, the image

¹⁵³ Other meditators told me that their psychedelic experiences helped them deal with altered states during meditation, and Strassman wrote that "In my early visits to the Zen Buddhist community at which I studied, I raised this question with many of the young American monks. Nearly everyone I asked at this training center answered that psychedelic drugs, especially LSD, first opened the doors to a new reality for them. It was the pursuit of stabilizing, strengthening, and broadening their initial psychedelic flash that led them to the discipline of a communal, meditation-based ascetic life." (Strassman, 2001: 233-234) One should also bear in mind that early meditation research was developed in order to provide mental maps for altered states of consciousness induced by psychedelics such as LSD (see Goleman, 1996), as we have seen in chapter II.

that he uses to exemplify this liminal experience is that of the grasshopper. Although slightly romanticized, this becoming animal is similar to the processes of identification advocated by deep ecologists such as Arne Naess (1984) to promote an ecological subjectivity – in the case of Thich Nhat Hanh, the animal represents the suspension of the ordinary mind and the habitual notion of self, allowing an increasing sense of freedom. Therefore, the image used by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe his experience reinforces the suspension of the rule of *res cogitans*. Becoming animal transgresses the modern self and permits the emergence of a nonmodern, decentred version of selfhood.

While interviewing practitioners of mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, some of them reported mystical experiences; however, the definition of mystical could change: instead of referring to an altered state of consciousness it could be understood as a continuous process of self-transformation or a moment when a particular difficult situation was solved. When I asked Michael, a dharma teacher, if he would like to share any transformative episode with mindfulness, his answer initially sounded simplistic, but it revealed a deeply noetic dimension:

“I remember there was a chance when I was in retreat and I had just finished eating and... I was washing up... and while I was washing the small saucer I had a...a strong insight into...what it really means to be mindful ... mindfulness is... really, really doing what you're doing ... it was an important experience, and a deep...a deep sense of how gloriously simple mindfulness is in essence.” (Interview, Michael, May 2011)

Likewise, Mitch, a good friend of mine who spent a period of time practicing mindfulness seriously and in isolation, shared the following account:

“I was working all day long on these gathas, and I had very little time to take a break. One day I decided that I would forget Nhat Hanh's gathas for the time being and watch some TV. It was some generic film about weddings... I watched and felt a certain kind of presence that seemed to feel altogether different. The feeling gradually gained presence with me, so much so that I eventually turned off the TV to see what was going on. I stood up and walked; I could not put my finger on just what was occurring to me. I walked to the bathroom to wash up for bed. The feeling of presence overtook me and suddenly I felt like I was there so entirely, so completely. It was definitely not a concentration, it was immensely

free... I washed my hands and it felt like the first time I ever washed them. I laughed with a slight hint of madness and cackled in tears of joy. I took a long time to look around the room and just looked with a sense of wonder. My vision was impeccably clear and there was nowhere to go and this was it..." (Interview, Mitch, June 2013)

In both cases, the interviewees became aware of the present moment. Michael mentioned that he became aware that mindfulness is really doing what one is doing, and Mitch felt like it was the first time he was washing his hands. In Mitch's case, this was accompanied by tears and wonder, and he mentioned that his vision became clear, highlighting the power of mindfulness to transform one's Umwelt, altering habitual ways of perceiving the environment. In both cases, these experiences emerged while the individuals were not practicing typical forms of meditation (such as sitting or walking meditation) – Michael was washing the dishes, and Mitch started feeling overwhelmed while watching TV. These states of passion, of total abandonment to mindfulness, were not mechanically induced by the practitioners – they were passive regarding these experiences, they emerged out of nowhere, they were accidents. As the Zen adage says, "Enlightenment is an accident, but meditation makes you accident prone" (Ophuls, 2007: 153). The installation of new automatisms through Zen and Vipassana practices allows selves to go through new experiences, new ways of dealing with their bodies, sensations, thoughts and emotions. However, these mystical experiences should be understood as a surplus, they escape individual control, and manifest as accidents, taking the practitioner by surprise, allowing him to enter realms of reality that are dismissed (and even pathologized) by ordinary states of consciousness.

Moreover, these nonmodern states suggest that the modern self can be suspended under certain conditions, and that ordinary states of consciousness are just one out of many possibilities available to humans. Aldous Huxley, in the *Doors of Perception*, and influenced by the theories of C. D. Broad and Bergson, suggested that selves are potentially Mind at Large:

"The function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The

function of the brain and the nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful. According to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. ... To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system.” (Huxley, 1963: 21)

One could argue that modern automatisms are filtering mechanisms that perform a reductive version of reality. That version is useful to manipulate the world and to render it efficient; individuals under control of themselves in ordinary states of consciousness are able to extend human *hubris* and to increase productivity, to operate machines, to kill other humans and animals. On the other hand, mystical experiences perform states of wonder and awe, and subjects surrender to dissolution and to the present moment. However, the Mind at Large hypothesis is limited in the sense that it is dual, it presupposes that selves and world are two distinct entities and that there is something “out there” that our ordinary minds prevent us from experiencing, as if we were “repressed” by our brain and nervous system. I am in no position to solve the longstanding philosophical debate between realism and idealism; instead of inquiring if there is such a thing as the Mind at Large, I think it is more interesting to contrast different outcomes and versions of self and world that emerge along with particular practices. The various examples presented in this section support the assumption that different assemblages can enact nonmodern ways of experiencing reality, tuning in to different expressions of the multiverse (James, 1896).

VI.V CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have analyzed the transformations of experience prompted by Zen and Vipassana assemblages. In order to transform regular experience – ordinary states of consciousness – subjects are submitted to particular settings that alter their habitual webs of associations (chapter IV) and they install new automatisms (chapter V).

These assemblages disrupt habitual ways of being, and selves generate resistances towards practices of meditation. They become restless, hallucinate, don't understand the point of so much pain and the mind becomes lost in thoughts of the past and the future. Meditation is challenging. Eventually, new automatisms become *stable*, and selves are able to experience the effects of new programs of action. They become aware of their bodies and breath in different ways and are able to enjoy walking differently, becoming aware of the present moment and the surrounding environment.

In some cases, the installation of new automatisms and new forms of affect can lead to mystical experiences. The programs of action of meditation are nonmodern, in the sense that they question habitual dualisms between mind and body, self and others, humans and nonhumans. However, when these experiences take place, selves lose control, they abandon themselves to new realms of reality that suspend the modern self. These experiences are not generated in a linear fashion, they escape the control of the meditator, they are accidents that meditation practice can eventually generate, including dissolution, nondual insights and becoming totally aware of the present moment.

These technologies of the self are new forms of mediation that enact new, nonmodern versions of the world. The insights of Peter-Paul Verbeek, who actively dialogued with Michel Foucault (including his work on technologies of the self) are highly relevant here. He suggests that: "What the world "is" and what subjects "are" arise from the interplay between humans and reality; the world that humans experience is "interpreted reality", and human existence is "situated subjectivity"." (Verbeek, 2011: 15)

Post-phenomenology studies human-technology associations, moving from the phenomenological focus on "things themselves" (displaying striking similarities with Vipassana claims of objectivity) to the mediated character of perception – "There is no "original" perception that is mediated by a device; the mediated perception itself is the "original"" (Verbeek, 2011: 15). This obviously raises a set of political issues, inviting us to question "how we are to best shape

the interrelatedness between humans and technology” (Verbeek, 2011: 156) (see chapter XIX).

Indeed, the mediations generated by Zen and Vipassana technologies contrast with their modern, dual counterparts, allowing subjects to experience a wide range of phenomena that challenge hegemonic and ordinary states of consciousness. Initially, the role of meditation is to replace regular automatisms – the installation of these new automatisms is difficult, generating struggles of agency characterized by resistance and accommodation (Pickering, 1995). Practitioners are initially shocked by their inability to meditate: their minds are agitated, their bodies ache, they do not adjust to the setting– they are unable to capture meditative states of consciousness. Progressively, they learn ways to accommodate and adapt, including changing their posture, coming back to the breath more frequently, repeating gathas, etc.; they adjust to a new paradigm of subjectivity, becoming able to *feel* meditation, overcoming ordinary states of consciousness.

These struggles of agency, involving phenomena of resistance and accommodation, can allow practitioners to tune in to nonmodern experiences, prevented by the modern automatisms that meditation aims at suspending. Mystical experiences are, therefore, phenomena whose emergence can be captured if humans adopt a new paradigm of selfhood, characterized by impermanence, mindfulness or Interbeing, notions that translate the range of phenomena afforded by Zen and Vipassana projects of the self and that are actually experienced by practitioners.

The new webs of associations, automatisms and experiences prompted by Zen and Vipassana assemblages are not limited to the development of altered states of consciousness; their aim is to govern the self beyond these retreats, inspiring new ways of being in the world and in everyday life. Therefore, the role of the following chapter is to analyze how these technologies of the nonmodern self are applied in everyday life and how the continuous practice of meditation reconfigures selfhood, leading to new forms of awareness, an increased sensitivity towards other humans and nonhumans and

new ways of dealing with time and space, including experiences of synchronicity.

VII. MEDITATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

“The self does not undergo modifications, it is itself a modification” (Deleuze, 1994: 79)

“The ideal Western ego is an isolated, ruggedly independent, separate entity, all alone in a dead universe devoid of meaning or consciousness – the leather-faced cowboy, pondering empty thoughts.” (Radin, 2013: 71)

VII.I INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters have analyzed the devices of subjectification mobilized by Zen and Vipassana assemblages and the experiential transformations they generate. I suggested that these assemblages alter habitual webs of associations and suspend normal automatisms, installing new ones. The experiences that emerge within these new assemblages can be understood as nonmodern, contrasting with the ordinary states of consciousness that characterize modern selves.

In order to become ways of being, Zen and Vipassana techniques must be applied in everyday life, becoming arts of living through sustained effort and leading to transformations of the self beyond those extraordinary experiences that retreats can generate (chapter VI). According to Jack Kornfield, a well known Dharma teacher in the West, the transition from meditation retreats to daily life can be difficult and demanding because “after the ecstasy comes the laundry” (Kornfield, 2001: xiii).

In sociology of religion, the implementation of a new way of being is traditionally understood according to different models of religious conversion (Heirich, 1977), “something that happens to a person who is destabilized by external or internal forces and then brought to commit the self to a conversionist

group by social-interactive pressures applied by the “trip” ... and its agents.” (Strauss, 1979: 158)

My perspective, instead of focusing on “social-interactive pressures” or “groups” (denoting a humanist interpretation of social worlds), follows an alternative account. My material suggests that we should follow a post-humanist understanding of meditation in everyday life, focusing on couplings between humans, technologies and nonhumans. I will analyze how individuals resort to a variety of Vipassana and Zen practices to deal with a diversity of life circumstances and how the continuous, long-term practice of these technologies progressively suspends normal, modern versions of the self.

My post-humanist analysis contrasts not only with humanist approaches in sociology of religion but also with those perspectives based on the notion of “self-identity” (Giddens, 1991; DeNora, 2004). According to Giddens, in post-traditional times self-identity is a reflexive project, consisting in “the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives.” (Giddens, 1991: 5). This notion is questioned by post-modern and post-structuralist insights (Burkitt, 2008), as well as by post-humanist literature that focuses on associations, entanglements, couplings and relationality (see chapter II). Consequently, my interpretation of meditation in daily life focuses on how technologies of Zen and Vipassana are mobilized and how they generate a number of long-term changes contrasting with paradigmatic accounts of the modern self.

Everyday life is a relevant locus of power and subjectification. The investigations of Goffman on interactions and social performances (Goffman, 1969) suggested that outside traditional, disciplinary institutions, power and subjectification are very much alive (Burkitt, 2008). Foucauldian analyses were mostly focused on institutions; however, there are a number of other assemblages, such as cities, that sustain and enact power (thus the relevance of the notion of psychogeography in chapter IV).

Michel de Certeau, in his brilliant “The Practice of Everyday life”, elaborated on forms of overcoming discipline, through what he called an antidiscipline that is developed through “clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already

caught in the nets of discipline.” (Certeau, 1984, XIV-V). In order to deal with the psychogeographical powers of their homes, workplaces and cities, practitioners develop practices of meditation that sustain nonmodern ways of life, allowing them to face adversity through equanimity and mindfulness.

This chapter is comprised of two main sections. In the first section, applying meditation in daily life, I focus on the application of Zen and Vipassana practices throughout everyday life situations. Influenced by notions such as *paraskeue*/equipment or Latour’s plug-ins, I develop a post-humanist exploration of meditation in everyday life. I also reflect on how practitioners deal with adversities (supported by Latour’s notion of anti-programs) and how Vipassana meditation can get out of control, not serving the role delineated by its designers – the eradication of suffering.

In the second section, nonmodern selves, I explore three aspects that reinforce the contrasts between meditative and nonmeditative selves, analyzing how practitioners develop new forms of awareness; how meditation enacts an extended version of the self and how it allows practitioners to develop new levels of sensitivity, fostering nonstandard phenomena.

VII.II APPLYING MEDITATION IN DAILY LIFE

VII.II.I INTRODUCTION

In this section I analyze how Vipassana and Zen practices are activated during everyday life, implementing new automatisms. I am influenced by Foucault’s interpretation of the Greek notion of *paraskeue*. This notion, sometimes translated as instructions or equipment¹⁵⁴, concerns “the set of necessary and sufficient moves, of necessary and sufficient practices, which will enable us to be stronger than anything that may happen in our life.” (Foucault, 2006: 321-322). Firstly, this *paraskeue* aims at managing behaviour, consisting of inductive schemes of action that progressively become one with the subject,

¹⁵⁴ See Rabinow (2003) for a reflection on modern equipment/*paraskeue*.

as if he is acting spontaneously (Foucault, 2006: 323-324). Secondly, these modes of regulating conduct must be “endowed with a sort of permanent virtual and effective presence, which enables immediate recourse to them when necessary” (Foucault, 2006: 324).

Foucault’s reflections highlight the importance of human-technology couplings; one could even argue that contemplative practitioners are cyborgs (Haraway, 1991), actively embodying technologies - practices of meditation – to become different selves. Latour, influenced by cyberspace, uses the term plug-in to suggest that nowadays human competencies come in successive layers, and that new software allows us to see what was previously hidden:

“When you reach some site in cyberspace, it often happens that you see nothing on the screen. But then a friendly warning suggests that you ‘might not have the right plug-ins’ and that you should ‘download’ a bit of software which, once installed on your system, will allow you to *activate* what you were unable to see before... competence doesn’t come in bulk any longer but literally in bits and bytes. ... you realize that to obtain ‘complete’ human actors, you have to *compose* them out of many successive *layers*, each of which is empirically distinct from the next.” (Latour, 2005: 207)

Meditation, as a plug-in, is a new kind of equipment to make up nonmodern selves, allowing them to activate particular programs of action – equanimity and mindfulness. These new competencies emerge within novel human-technology couplings, inviting practitioners to come back to the breath, to observe their sensations or to recruit nonhumans. This new equipment requires participants to displace meditation from its habitual setting (the retreat), bringing meditation into daily life and facing any anti-programs that might arise, those “devices that seek to annul, destroy, subvert, circumvent a program of action” (Latour, 1991b: 18). The workplace, the dynamics of private life and modern cities can become anti-programs that jeopardize meditation, obliging practitioners to endure struggles of agency. The role of the following sections is to analyze how interviewees apply these technologies in daily life (two different sections will explore how Vipassana and Zen techniques are mobilized), how they deal with anti-programs and how meditation can get out of control, instead of following the program of action originally designed by meditation teachers.

VII.II.II VIPASSANA

Vipassana's program of action concerns the maintenance of equanimity in all life situations, supported by the awareness of sensations developed through meditation. According to Goenka, when something happens, the meditator should wait a few moments, focusing on sensations, and only afterwards she should act (Goenka, 1987: 21). This art of living equips individuals with three technologies of the self: Vipassana, Anapana and Metta, involving the awareness of physical sensations, the concentration on the breath and the generation of "positive" emotions.

Sil remembers that after he started practicing Vipassana he had to "train his *sankharas*" to deal with a difficult colleague at work. She had quite an aggressive attitude towards others, and Sil saw that there were two options: to become her enemy or to be her friend. Since he believed she was being misunderstood, he decided that he would try to detach himself from the negative emotions that his mind was gearing towards her. In order to do so, he resorted to the breath:

"I had to breathe a lot, to be calm and stable, especially when we had an argument, so when there was a misunderstanding and she attacked me aggressively I would just breathe and wouldn't say anything, because I knew she was misunderstood." (Interview, Sil, December 2011)

Sil told me that the sittings of strong determination prepared him to deal with difficult situations - they taught him to be still, observing what was happening with the awareness of impermanence. Both good and bad things would come up, so he should just observe them, aware of impermanence, and this helped him change his habitual reactions. Her colleague, as well as the workplace environment, could be understood as an anti-program of equanimity – she could have made him lose his temper, reacting aggressively. However, he was able to resort to the breath to maintain equanimity.

According to Philip, we can understand Vipassana's program of action in daily life as supported by the gaze of equanimity – someone who does not react to sensations should not blindly react to external stimuli:

“If I am going to accept this sensation I am having in my body, when I'm meditating, it's obvious that I will also accept the sensation I'm having caused by someone cursing me out or honking, because I'm not going to generate negative energy for something like that.” (Interview, Philip, September 2010)

Vipassana's equipment turns sensations into indicators of mental states: when an anti-program challenges one's equanimity, the technology is automatically activated, moving awareness towards sensations. The following passage exemplifies how regular automatisms are transformed, and how practitioners resort to sensations to maintain equanimity:

“It's more like they [sensations] come up, actually, spontaneously, now, more than trying to be aware, like I was just saying about a work situation, it can be a bit stressful, then it's like the indicator coming on, just saying, oh...look at this! My attention will go to sensations that are telling me something very often.” (Interview, Rebecca, April 2012)

Anti-programs are reduced to sensations that can be “observed” with the awareness of impermanence, allowing practitioners to become automatically aware of sensations. If these sensations are hard to deal with, practitioners can direct their attention towards subtle ones, easily found on the palms or the top of the head, indicating a replacement of the habitual habit of reacting to sensations. In some cases, equanimity is disrupted and turning the attention towards sensations is not sufficient. In those cases, some practitioners resort to Metta, deliberately attempting to generate positive feelings. As Joanna puts it:

“And if I'm in a difficult situation, if somebody's coming to me and they're really hostile, Metta, I find Metta is the only thing...strong ... sensations inside come in these situations, because there's a lot of adrenaline going around, the brain releases all this adrenaline, and I just observe the sensations and ... oh my goodness...may I be happy...may I be peaceful, whatever's gonna come in my way I accept it gracefully, I accept it with equanimity, and it is like just putting a shield over myself.” (Interview, Joanna, April 2012)

Joanna's words highlight the immunological dimension of technologies of the self, their potential to "protect" practitioners from the outside world. According to Sloterdijk, the *homo immunologicus* is the one "who must give his life, with all its dangers and surfeits, a symbolic framework, ... the human being that struggles with itself in concern for its form" (Sloterdijk, 2013: 10). Anthropotechnics involve struggles of agency to attain particular ways of being. In some cases, this struggle involves detachment from the outside world, setting up shields to protect the self from anti-programs. As Derek told me:

"The first time I went [on a Vipassana retreat] I was still working, I worked at a bank for more than thirty years, and I had a hectic lifestyle... so it helped me a lot...I started being...although I was in contact with everybody, it was almost like if I was inside a bubble. Although I had contact with my co-workers, whatever was surrounding me didn't affect me at all." (Interview, Derek, December 2011)

Although Derek was working at a bank and had a fast-paced lifestyle, he was able to detach himself from whatever was happening. Vipassana, as a way of being, is supported by various techniques whose aim is to support equanimity. It installs new automatisms, focusing on the breath, sensations and the attempt to radiate positive emotions. Although, for beginners, this requires a tremendous effort, progressively these automatisms become embodied. The implementation of this way of being is eminently performative – it is through modifications of habitual automatisms that equanimity is activated. Vipassana's equipment involves the creation of a protective bubble, reinforcing one's immunological status over the world, translating events into sensations. This contrasts with Thich Nhat Hanh's proposal, as we will see in the following section.

VII.II.III MINDFULNESS

As suggested in chapter IV, Zen and Vipassana have different ways of managing webs of associations in order to transform subjectivities. In the case of mindfulness, one's immunological status is not fostered through isolations (as in Vipassana) but by actively extending habitual webs of associations through the enrolment of nonhumans. Those elements, humans and nonhumans (devices such as the breath, objects or trees) that sustain mindfulness, are called bells of mindfulness, understood in a metaphorical sense. Practitioners should be able to find in the environment and in their own bodies opportunities to support mindfulness, altering their Umwelt. Michael, a Dharma teacher, gave me a good example of such process:

"I find the metaphorical bells that we have in our daily lives very important ... The other day I was rushing around at work and I didn't have much time for lunch, so I dashed off to get some sandwiches, I dashed in a hurry, and I wasn't being very mindful, and returning back from the sandwich shop to my office I walked through a churchyard... a graveyard and then...I saw some cherry trees which were in blossom, and that was a bell of mindfulness to me, because it stopped me ... and that made me think...what I am doing rushing when I'm eating, and that made me stop and sit on the wall by the churchyard and I just watched the trees for about five minutes ... those cherry trees were my Bodhisattva¹⁵⁵ in that moment...it stopped me in the middle of my rush, and unmindful state, and allowed me to slow down and gain a perspective and space." (Interview, Michael, May 2011)

In the case of Michael, mindfulness was being jeopardized by the pace of the working life, acting as an anti-program, and he enrolled the trees, as metaphorical bells, to come back to himself – he slowed down and regained "spaciousness". In this case, the environment acted as a bell of mindfulness. In other cases, practitioners rely on physical devices (such as actual bells) or even

¹⁵⁵ According to Annice Booth, "One of several definitions of the word bodhisattva that is widely accepted is that a bodhisattva is a being of *bodhi*, or wisdom, who is becoming a Buddha. Another definition, especially in the East, is that the bodhisattva is one who vows to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment." (Booth, 1999: 55)

pebbles, carried around to maintain the desired state¹⁵⁶. Ted, a practitioner I interviewed in Plum Village, told me that he always carries a pebble in his pocket to help him deal with intimacy and difficult emotions:

“I always carry this...it’s a rock, a pebble [he shows it to me, it’s a small round grey pebble], so...it’s also...it can also be an anchor, just to hold it and, I use it when somebody shares with me something personal, or something difficult, ... speaking from the heart, then I hold a rock, it’s a pebble...” (Interview, Ted, February 2011)

Ted’s words highlight the deeply material nature of mindfulness and technologies of the self, as well as the importance of relationality, couplings between humans and nonhumans. If these nonhumans, technologies and metaphorical bells are stripped away from the meditator he can say goodbye to mindfulness. There is no mindfulness without technology and no technology without matter.

Mindfulness is also activated through bodily functions, as we have seen in chapter V, and practicing in the outside world is also supported by the breath. Actually, most instances of re-activating mindfulness involve breathing: one can breathe for three times after hearing the bell (or while engaging with some other metaphorical device of mindfulness) or just spontaneously when “something happens”. As Ursula puts it:

“With the experience of meditation, and in various circumstances, by breathing and trying to understand what is happening, but without identifying with that, I saw that I have an ability to be in that situation while realizing that things do not end there.” (Interview, Ursula, December 2011)

¹⁵⁶ I remember that in one occasion I was having a discussion with my girlfriend and it was starting to escalate; I felt that it could easily turn into an exchange of harsh words if I didn’t do something about it. At that moment I was washing the dishes, and I immediately focused my attention on that activity and on my breath coming in and going out; this allowed me to detach myself from the strong emotions that were arising and to return to the present moment; afterwards, I slowed down my speech and tried to deal with the situation compassionately, without antagonizing her.

Finally, gathas can also be widely used by practitioners. In Plum Village, Neil told me that he was planning to “plant” some gathas in his home after going back to the US. These gathas would reconfigure the spiritual texture of the domestic space, “reminding” him to be mindful:

“Putting a little gatha, a little verse on your bathroom window, while I’m brushing my teeth or while I’m washing my hands, smile at the universe, be thankful for the water that is coming out of this tap, so I have a plan to put all those things around my apartment, to make sure that no matter what I’m doing these signs will like BOOM, hit me in the face, and remind me to come back to the present moment.” (Interview, Neil, February 2011)

Neil’s plans correspond to the attempt to transform the psychogeography of the house through the use of gathas as material-semiotic (Law, 2008) technologies, re-orienting his performance during everyday activities¹⁵⁷. These gathas can be enacted as material signs or as sentences, mentally repeated during daily activities. Jane told me that, although she is more likely to use gathas during retreats, there are times when these are activated while brushing her teeth or cleaning the house:

“While I’m cleaning my teeth I’m refreshing my speech...and I’m aware of mindful speech...so it’s like purifying...a gatha that is sometimes helpful...cleaning the house...because sometimes I’m not kind of...I think life is too short for dusting, and sometimes my house gets messy, and I think...ok...let’s have a different approach... when I’m cleaning this space I’m cleaning my own mental space... or making the world more beautiful...you know...whatever it is...gathas are about cleaning and making the space fresh and clear, then it actually gives me more clarity to work.” (Interview, Jane, April 2011)

These gathas help practitioners become aware of Interbeing, linking performances (such as cleaning the house) with one’s inner space, challenging dualistic conceptions on cleanliness and dirt. They reconfigure habitual

¹⁵⁷ I had a chance to chat with Neil some months after interviewing him in Plum Village and he told me that he found it quite hard to maintain mindfulness outside the monastery, but I didn’t ask him if he actually managed to “plant” the gathas in his house.

associations, training practitioners to experience reality in a nonmodern fashion, transforming their ways of life.

VII.III.IV THE CONTINUITY OF PRACTICE AND STRUGGLING WITH ANTI-PROGRAMS

Much of the effort to implement a new way of being involves dealing with old, deep rooted habits and with the environment, generating struggles of agency to maintain mindfulness and equanimity active. One should also maintain a constant, daily practice, in order to allow the installation of new automatisms.

Vipassana meditators should attend at least one 10-day retreat per year, and there are local meditation groups that offer one-hour sittings with audio tapes of Goenka (including the one I attended). One can also attend one-day Vipassana courses. Ideally, one should practice two hours of Vipassana per day, one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening¹⁵⁸.

Zen practitioners have an array of practices they can resort to – some of them have formal periods of meditation everyday (such as 40 minutes in the morning and in the evening), usually involving sitting and walking. The “evolution” of practice is far from being linear, including “periods of regression, restructuring and reintegration as part of the basic growth pattern” (Kornfield, 1979: 53). Although individual practice is usually not as powerful and transformative as it can be in the retreat setting, meditation is a permanent training, and one’s equanimity and mindfulness can easily vanish without a continuous effort of self-cultivation.

An important dimension of these projects consists in maintaining particular restraints in daily life. In chapter IV, I presented some of the regulations that have to be followed in order to participate in a Vipassana

¹⁵⁸ Most of the interviewees are not able to meditate two hours a day, since it interferes with their work/study schedule, therefore joining a Sangha can be highly supportive to keep a semi-regular practice.

retreat. The five Buddhist precepts have been skilfully adapted by Thich Nhat Hanh to modern times (Hanh, 1993), and in chapter VIII I suggest that they reinforce nondual couplings between humans and the environment. Certainly, the story of meditation in daily life could be written as a narrative about ethics and the good life, since technologies of the self are inevitably intertwined with ethical formation (Foucault, 2006). The ethical dimension – Sila, in the case of Vipassana and the five mindfulness trainings and the 14 precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing (Hanh, 1997a) - is considered relevant by practitioners. However, I will try to tell a different story here. Instead of focusing on these precepts and regulations, I would like to suggest that we should understand these restrictions as dealing with conflicting programs of action that enact different states of consciousness and affect. In sum, I suggest that meditation supports particular ways of being that can be put at risk by particular environmental elements, including certain drugs and foods, meaning that constraints are positive (Gomart and Hennion, 1999).

Rebecca used the metaphor of switching channels to illustrate what happened when, many years ago, after starting her regular Vipassana practice, she decided to smoke some marijuana:

“I actually felt paralyzed and I felt aware of what was going in my mind...my mind became like a TV switching channels and it was really unpleasant.” (Interview, Rebecca, April 2012)

This metaphor suggests that equanimity, understood as a particular state of mind, involving detached observation of whatever happens, is supported by an assemblage including performative and material devices that cannabis can eventually alter. In order to tune in on equanimity, one has to repeat a set of performances and conditions eventually jeopardized by marijuana. Following Becker's (1953) reflections on marijuana, one could argue that the program of action of cannabis implies that the smoker enjoys the sensations it causes, thus contrasting with the sensuous detachment of the equanimous gaze. We are dealing, therefore, with two different “highs” or states of consciousness. Maxwell, who in one of the Vipassana retreats had to come to terms with a bad

trip on *salvia divinorum*, actually used the term “high” to compare Vipassana and cannabis programs of action:

“We met this pot farmer [shortly after the Vipassana retreat] ...I smoked a little bit and it brought me down from the meditation...which was too bad, because it’s a much better high.” (Interview, Maxwell, February 2011)

As practitioners become more aware of their body, they are able to identify those elements that support their practice and those that jeopardize it. Apart from marijuana, food and a variety of other agents can also become anti-programs, as put by Sean, a long-term practitioner of mindfulness:

“For me the process of meditation has increased my sensitivity to my body ... I’m more aware for instance what effect certain foods have on my body...then I was before...so...five or six years ago I ate a lot of sugar...like candy...or chocolate...and sugar and tea and didn’t notice any negative effect and now when I eat sugar it has a very obvious negative effect on my body...and on my mind...definitely my sensitivity to the effects of eating certain things has become heightened ...and also the effect of other kinds of consumption, like watching a television show... or certain conversations...I notice... if... there’s a certain level of toxins... and I’m very aware of it...and my body...I can feel a kind of...like a reaction...a tension...a tightness or a discomfort...that can arise...” (Interview, Sean, February 2011)

Bourdieu’s argument, in *Distinction*, is that taste is constructed by economic and social factors, reinforcing class differences¹⁵⁹. My own material suggests that meditation affects the taste of practitioners due to repeated performances in controlled settings. These practices are not developed to achieve cultural or class distinction but to allow the emergence of new paradigms of the self, transforming one’s Umwelt, including the perception of the effects of cannabis. Since Vipassana and Zen elicit particular states of consciousness, depending on particular performances and associations and contrasting with ordinary states of consciousness, there are some actants

¹⁵⁹ According to Bourdieu, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” (Bourdieu, 1984: 5-6). Henion suggests that we should abandon the dualism of things on one side as autonomous and inert and, on the other side, as mere social signs, advocating a pragmatic conception of mediations and effects “in which the body that tastes and the taste of the object, the group that loves it and the range of things they love, are produced together, one by the other.” (Henion, 2007: 112).

whose introduction can jeopardize these ways of being, preventing selves from tuning in to meditative states.

VII.II.V MEDITATION AND MADNESS

Previously I have explored the maintenance of equanimity and mindfulness in daily life. This depends on the application of technologies to deal with everyday life phenomena, replacing habitual automatisms, supporting new ways of being. One could argue that these technologies lead to the docilization of selves, linking meditation with buzzwords such as well-being, happiness and quality of life (Praisman, 2008), the tenets of modern Buddhism (McMahan, 2008). One should not forget that there were even claims that the happiest person in the world is a Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard¹⁶⁰, and mindfulness based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1991) is flourishing, being used by the British National Health System (Crane and Kuyken, 2013), leading Dawson and Turnbull (2006) to suggest that mindfulness might have become the new opiate of the masses. Meditation seems to go quite well with the docilization strategies of contemporary advanced liberal societies and their biopolitical dispositifs, linked to technologies of government that require “an increasing emphasis on the responsibility of individuals to manage their own affairs, to secure their own security with a prudential eye on the future” (Rose, 2007: 4)¹⁶¹. Meditative technologies would help neoliberal subjects getting on with their stressful lives, helping them adjust with a higher well-being, rendering them more “stable” and, obviously, docile, by setting up protective bubbles. According to Zizek, meditation is the perfect ideological supplement of capitalism:

¹⁶⁰ <http://www.examiner.com/article/tibetan-monk-is-world-s-happiest-man-say-neuroscientists> (Retrieved: 13/09/2013)

¹⁶¹ As Rose states: “Today, we are required to be flexible, to be in continuous training, life-long learning, to undergo perpetual assessment, continual incitement to buy, constantly to improve oneself, to monitor our health, to manage our risk.” (Rose, 2007: 154)

“The “Western Buddhist” meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in the capitalist economy while retaining the appearance of sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary volume to his Protestant Ethic, titled The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.” (Zizek, 2005)¹⁶²

In chapter VIII, I suggest that meditation is intimately coupled with social action, including innovative ways of tackling the environmental crisis, instead of leading towards a general acceptance and resignation, as Zizek claims. Moreover, meditators are aware of contemporary attempts to medicalize meditation, turning it into a mere health application. As Michael, a Dharma teacher in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, told me:

“Quite recently mindfulness and meditation practices have become popular in means of generating happiness in society. I don’t know what that’s about, whether it’s a passing phase or whether it’s something more fundamental, people are realizing that material wealth, belongings, things that traditionally have been linked with comfort, happiness, aren’t necessarily enough on their own. I think it’s interesting to reflect on the extent to which meditation is being promoted as a tool of generating comfort and a sense of being at ease with one’s life ...to that extent it’s a kind of therapy, if you like, for our modern world, as opposed to meditation as an integral part of a spiritual path of insight development... really getting to understand the nature of reality. So I think there’s a big distinction to be drawn between meditation as a therapy and meditation as a spiritual path, it’s important.” (Interview, Michael, May 2011)

An important dimension of the critique of contemporary meditation by Zizek and Michael concerns the transformation of spirituality into a kind of therapy, reminding us of Lasch’s critique of new age spirituality (see chapter VI). However, meditation and contemplative practices do not necessarily enact “performative islands of stability” (Pickering, 2012:6), stabilizing the outside world for the sake of one’s sanity and wellbeing. In the Christian tradition, the Dark Night of the Soul is an important and painful transformative process, including “a variety of physical and psychological purifications, eventually undergoing a profound spiritual death and rebirth” (Bache, 2000: 15). Some of

¹⁶² Zizek, S. (2005), *Revenge of Global Finance*. In *These times*, May 21, 2005. http://inthesetimes.com/article/2122/revenge_of_global_finance (Retrieved: 14/09/2013)

the meditators I interviewed underwent particularly difficult experiences (see chapter VI), and in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition of Vipassana there are some stages of insight, called Dukkha Nanas, whose experience can generate fear and terror (Sayadaw, 1994; Koster and Oosterhoff, 2004).

Although there is already some research on the negative effects of meditation (see Walsh, 1979; Otis, 1984; Kuijpers et al., 2007)¹⁶³, this is still an underrepresented field, considering the numerous studies that promote the positive outcomes of mindfulness. In this section I will analyze the experience of a blogger that signs as XYLOPHONEHANDS¹⁶⁴, challenging the contemporary conception of meditation as a sort of magic bullet (see chapter VIII) that can solve numerous medical and psychological issues. The narrative that I am going to explore contrasts with the current appropriation of meditation by the industry of well-being, presenting meditation as a transgressive endeavour that challenges one's sanity.

The aforementioned blogger, a young man still living with his parents, attended a Vipassana retreat, had a highly powerful experience, attempted to commit suicide and was eventually hospitalized¹⁶⁵. He reports that, after some days of practicing Vipassana, his awareness became strong, and he noticed that there were two areas particularly tense, in the nerve going from the roof of his mouth, behind the nose, and up to an area above the eyes in his lower forehead and inward. He thought that this could be his "third eye", although the Assistant Teacher dismissed the importance of such notion for Vipassana. This meditator mentions that the body scan became increasingly automatic, shifting

¹⁶³ Willoughby Britton, from Brown University, is currently leading the "Dark Night Project", which includes the qualitative analysis of self-reports on negative experiences with meditation.

¹⁶⁴ His complete story can be found here - <http://xylophonehands.blogspot.pt/> (Retrieved: 14/09/2013)

¹⁶⁵ I witnessed how people can lose their minds while attending Vipassana retreats. During my second retreat, two of my roommates had a discussion over the heating system - when the Assistant Teacher called them, one became aggressive and was asked to leave the retreat; he didn't accept the AT's decision; he started shouting at the servers, cursing them and attempted to grab the other participant's bag (the one he had an argument with) to empty it on his bed - he even told me that he was afraid they were going to hurt him and that I was going to be his "witness". Eventually the servers were able to make him leave the premises.

“from something I have to do to something I do automatically”, indicating that the technique acquired autonomy – it no longer depended on the human agent to be “activated”, but was rather out of control, scanning the body inside out and increasing the awareness of sensations. This story exemplifies a replacement of automatisms that went terribly wrong. As he wrote: “I let “the eye” do its own work”. It seems like it is tracing a path of awareness around the inside of my skull beneath the cheeks, nose, forehead, and the upper half of the skull in general.” (<http://xylophonehands.blogspot.pt/>)

The heightened awareness got out of control, generating very strong sensations, such as a throbbing feeling inside the head; moreover, the self became fragmented, with the meditator writing that his awareness became divided: “It seems as if I have developed two kinds of awareness now, one in which I can go forward and trace new connections, and one in which I can reverse it and go backwards in time.” (<http://xylophonehands.blogspot.pt/>)

As the scanning technology attains autonomy, moving on its own, he finds it impossible to sleep: as soon as he closes his eyes, the “eye” starts working, looking for sensations, moving to the heart or the brain and the prospect of imminent death becomes a possibility. When the retreat was over and he went back home, the awareness was still present and autonomous. He was still unable to sleep, with the awareness scanning all the internal organs, feeling the blood vessels and the tingling sensations at the surface: these sensations reached such an overwhelming intensity that the practitioner even had a seizure. At a certain point (and after contacting the AT, who told him to focus on the extremities and the outside of the body), he decided to kill himself: “I had convinced myself that I had actually lesioned my brain by developing this faculty of awareness and ... that I would continue having more and more frequent seizures ... until I died.” (<http://xylophonehands.blogspot.pt/>)

After stabbing himself with a couple of kitchen knives, he threw himself into a passing car. He was eventually hospitalized, and spent one week in the psychiatric ward, heavily medicated with anti-psychotic and anti-depressant drugs.

This episode tells us that meditation can generate unintended outcomes. Ideally, Vipassana should allow practitioners to become aware of sensations and to respond to everyday life events with equanimity. This happens through the installation of a new automatism, allowing individuals to develop a new relationship with their bodies. In this case, the new automatism got out of control, acquiring a life of its own, damaging the subject. The participant was able to increase his awareness exponentially, tuning in to new realms of experience; however, this awareness, instead of allowing him to become equanimous, became dangerous. This suggests that meditation, as a form of technological mediation, does not always follow the intentions of its designers (Verbeek, 2011: 52) – instead of helping the practitioner deal with human suffering, it can multiply it; instead of liberating him from reactivity, he is shackled and enslaved by the obsessive “eye of awareness”.

Second, the introduction of a new automatism emerged as part of a setting that radically clashes with what western individuals are used to, and in chapter IV I suggested that Vipassana assemblages remind us of Klein’s “Shock Doctrine” (Klein, 2007). Subjects submit themselves to new webs of associations and automatisms that suspend regular ways of being for 10 days, and they learn technologies to become different types of people and to experience the world differently. In some cases, this can trigger spiritual emergencies, a term coined by Stanislav and Christina Grof (1993) to characterize altered states of consciousness that signal an evolutionary crisis (including the previously mentioned dark night of the soul). The absence of a strong support structure¹⁶⁶ led the participant to continue practicing meditation (increasing the autonomous agency of the “eye of awareness”), eventually leading to the suicide attempt. During the retreat he was told to continue practicing; as various authors suggest (Huxley, 1963; Shusterman, 1999; Johnson, 2002), modern education does not focus on the non-verbal humanities

¹⁶⁶ According to Grof and Grof (1993), it is possible to slow down spiritual emergencies by engaging in a “heavier diet, drinking of beverages containing large amounts of sugar or honey, intense physical exercise such as jogging, hiking, swimming, or garden work, avoidance of stressful and over stimulating situations, discontinuation of any spiritual practice, and in the extreme, occasional use of minor tranquilizers as a temporary measure” (Grof and Grof, 1993: 144).

that could eventually help the practitioner make sense of this new aesthetic experience. Moreover, psychiatry was unable to distinguish between mystical and pathological episodes (Grof, 1998) and to provide spiritual support. The solution was to normalize the meditator through heavy doses of psychiatric drugs, in an attempt to re-install the widely accepted ordinary state of consciousness.

Finally, this episode is highly interesting because it exemplifies a suspension of the modern self, an inversion of the traditional domain of *res cogitans* over *res extensa*, mind over matter. The technology of Vipassana acquired a life of its own, scanning the body over and over again. This caused strange sensations, making some parts of the body seem like they were going to explode – the body without organs (see Artaud, 1965: 164-8, Deleuze, 1990), where man is understood as pure will, was compromised by the organic explosion of affect, fluids, subtle sensations inside and outside. The body becomes alive and rebels against the individual, causing seizures and preventing him from acting normally. The practitioner is no longer able to control the struggles of agency, he is no longer in charge, and he is taken over by the gaze of Vipassana. The practitioner becomes trapped in a state of consciousness that emerges alongside the installation of Vipassana automatisms. Indeed, the practitioner was able to tune in to *anicca*, and his awareness was so refined that he even felt blood vessels and internal organs - he was able to capture the experience of impermanence; however, the experience would not go away, he was in a permanent state of meditative passion, scanning, observing, dissolving, transgressing the boundaries between observation and affection. His nonmeditative regular self crumbled due to the new technology of self-observation, and his agency was dissolved - he became a schizophrenic, dominated by the intensity of affect and organs, with a new inner eye working beyond his will, and the only way out was to commit suicide, a desperate attempt to re-install some form of control. This is definitely not what the proponents of Mindfulness Based applications want their workshop participants to experience, exemplifying the dangerous, cruel and transgressive side of Vipassana, its ability to induce transformations that are not limited to the management of pain or stress by a modern self still in control.

These various sections explored the use of meditation in daily life, turning technologies into arts of living. Following a pragmatic concern, we should now analyze how meditation creates new kinds of people that can be contrasted with their modern counterparts, exploring some relevant long-term changes fostered by meditation.

VII.III MEDITATION AND NONMODERN SELVES

The role of this section is to explore the nonmodern dimension of the paradigmatic changes fostered by meditation. In the previous chapter I elaborated on a wide range of experiential changes operated by meditation, affordances that emerge alongside Zen and Vipassana technologies. These experiences indicate changes of Gestalt, displaying new ways of perceiving the self and the world. Academic literature on meditation has generated strong indications that this contemplative practice has real and measurable long-term effects (see chapter II). The Shamatha Project, the most comprehensive study on meditation to date, has concluded that this practice has positive impacts on attention, emotions, well-being and bio-markers¹⁶⁷.

I am particularly interested in the potential of meditation as an alternative to the modern paradigm of subjectivity, and I suggest that there are three main aspects highlighting the nonmodern dimension of meditation: the development of new forms of awareness; the enactment of an extended self and the experience of nonstandard phenomena. These themes allow us to conceive alternatives to three tenets of the paradigmatic modern self – the naturalization of ordinary states of consciousness; the dualism between selves, other humans and nonhumans and limited understandings of what a body/self can do and experience.

¹⁶⁷ See <http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu/people/jeremy/shamatha-project> (Retrieved: 12/09/2013)

VII.III.I AWARENESS

As suggested in chapters V and VI, an important aspect of meditation is the development of new forms of awareness. A relevant aspect shared by most meditators, especially advanced ones, is the fact that meditation allowed them to become aware of themselves and their habit patterns in new ways. This is a positivity that emerges along with the installation of particular automatisms, allowing participants to relate to themselves differently. Early research on meditation suggested that it is a form of de-automatization (Deikman, 1966; Gill and Brenman, 1959), and current mindfulness research has highlighted the positive impact of meditation on past conditionings, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Smith et al., 2011; Vujanovic et al., 2011; Owens et al., 2012). This could lead us to suggest that meditation is a practice of “freedom”, reinforcing the assumption that there is some sort of “nature or a human foundation which, as a result of a certain number of historical, social or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism.” (Foucault, 1987b: 113)

Pastoral authorities, such as Goenka, advocate meditation as a practice of liberation from the craving/aversion dialectic. After setting up a standpoint psychology – a map of the self – performances of meditation are prescribed as means to overcome the unwanted condition, reactivity, accompanied by new ways of experiencing the self and the world, revealing its “truth” (see chapter VI.) Freedoms are always contingent and emerge within practices of government (Foucault, 1987, 1995) - meditation, as a technology of self-government, brings forth new freedoms, including new forms of awareness that correspond to Gestalt changes, following the devices of subjectification this dissertation has analyzed. As I suggested in chapter II, influenced by Gomart and Hennion’s (1999) insights, one should understand these positivies as affordances that emerge alongside new webs of associations (including constraints) and technologies.

In practice, meditators should be able to become aware of a variety of phenomena, including ordinary dimensions of human existence and a number

of manifestations of mental life (Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2003:2) according to meditative lenses. This allows practitioners to face their own habit patterns, repetitive traits of behaviour and thought, in new ways.

According to Neil, mindfulness allowed him to detach himself from habits that, as he stated, made him act like a robot (such as working without regards for his personal wellbeing, or smoking too much marijuana). Instead of acting automatically, he now feels that he has a choice:

“I think it [mindfulness] slowed down my reactions to things, I don't immediately do stuff out of habit or just very direct reaction, you know, like this happens automatically, almost like a robot, I feel more in control of myself because when things happen I see I have a desire and an energy that is pushing me in a certain direction but I don't feel...I'm not always doing it, you know, it just arises, and I see that it's there, and then I can either follow it or not, you know ... it's actually much easier not to do those things, you know, 'cos you're running around in circles and wasting all your energy.” (Interview, Neil, February 2011)

Neil's words suggest that meditation makes him more aware of his habits, allowing him to observe them, thus increasing his agency, his ability to follow a particular desire/energy or not. Esther, a Vipassana meditator, told me that through the observation of subtle sensations regular habits can be broken, reinforcing the fact that meditation brings forth a new form of awareness towards one's thought patterns:

“Because I think meditation makes my mind...I can really observe what's going on in my mind... sometimes I'm out of control, can see a lot of thoughts coming up, and you don't know why they're coming up, they keep...but in meditation you can start observing this concept, or this thought, or where it starts, so..ok... I got into a habit, so I can observe these habits of myself and I think meditation is a really powerful tool to just work on myself ... If I know the habit I can break it. ... It's through observing those subtle sensations and how we treat them.” (Interview, Esther, October 2011)

One could interpret the narratives of self-control apparently displayed by Neil and Esther as reinforcing the idea that meditation increases self-mastery, thus linking mindfulness and Vipassana to traditional narratives of western

philosophy, such as Platonism (Taylor, 1989)¹⁶⁸, not to mention contemporary forms of neo-liberal governmentality. What happens is that these technologies progressively enact new mediations, fostering new forms of self-perception, becoming the new mental equipment of selves. Meditators are literally transformed by continuous practice, and Brad resorts to the image of taking a picture to exemplify the process of replacing automatisms through meditation, allowing the emergence of a new kind of awareness:

“Mindfulness is like a habit...it’s like a quality...it’s like one of your ... it’s an instrument... but just the mind is an instrument...you can look with the mind...the mind can look with the mind at the mind... you see that...the mind is like the guy who takes the photo...who is the camera... and the picture itself!” (Interview, Brad, February 2011)

Joanna, a long term Vipassana meditator, told me that now she feels mentally re-wired; previous habits are no longer around, suggesting that the technology of the self allowed her to experience herself and her emotions differently, developing a new kind of awareness that allows her to realize the impermanent nature of things:

“It’s like being re-wired! ... I think in terms of habit patterns it’s a bit like not having the previous stuff around. ... in terms of my own habit patterns, yeah! You know...I think in terms of ... just feeling sometimes depressed, coping with that, learning to see it for what it really is, because even though it comes it does go, it is impermanent, and if it’s my, if it’s my time to have that experience then I embrace it now, instead of trying to push away my negative emotions, and feeling depressed, I welcome them now, because I think this is a really good opportunity to be equanimous, with this, when it comes, so it’s almost like there’s no really bad days anymore.” (Interview, Joanna, April 2012)

Joanna’s words suggest that she is able to detach herself from the theatre of consciousness, regardless of what happens, constantly maintaining equanimity. Leary et al. (1976) argued that the experience of LSD was heavily influenced by two major aspects: the set (involving the personality structure and the mood of the psychonaut) and the setting (environmental, social and cultural

¹⁶⁸ According to Taylor, for Plato “The mastery of self through reason brings with it these three fruits: unity with oneself, calm, and collected self-possession.” (Taylor, 1989: 116)

aspects). In the case of Zen and Vipassana, the practitioner should be able to maintain meditative modes of existence, tuning in to equanimity, without being affected by both set and setting, giving a new meaning to Buddha's words - "Every person should be a lamp unto himself" (Hanh, 1991: 548).

The development of awareness is not merely negative. According to long-term practitioners, feelings of loving-kindness, compassion and a deep sense of connection progressively emerge. When Jack Kornfield asked Dipa Ma, a highly advanced Vipassana practitioner, what was it like in her mind, she answered that "In my mind there are three things: concentration, loving-kindness and peace." (Schmidt, 2005: 132). Meditation promotes the cultivation of positive or wholesome emotions, sometimes explicitly, as exemplified by the practice of Metta.

Meditation opens up new forms of awareness towards one's self: interviewees usually translate this awareness into the ability to deal with their thought patterns, developing new ways of managing their minds. This new freedom is not merely negative; as I suggest in the following section, the transformations operated by meditation can lead to an increasing empathy towards others, challenging dominant, dualist versions of selfhood.

VII.III.II THE EXTENDED SELF

In this section I argue that the second major characteristic of Zen and Vipassana ways of being is the development of an extended version of subjectivity, opposed to paradigmatic, dualist version of the modern self. In a 1998 paper, Clark and Chalmers drew on the notion of "extended mind" to illustrate a process of active externalism where certain objects (the example given was that of a notebook) are actually "part" of the mind, actively supporting cognitive processes. My analysis suggests that Zen and Vipassana assemblages are supported by a set of heterogeneous devices, highlighting the role of relationality in the enactment of new paradigms of selfhood. The use of the term "extended self" in this section, instead of being "genetic" (linked to the

devices of subjectification mobilized by meditation), rather suggests that through the continuous practice of meditation one is able to identify with other humans and nonhumans, suspending an atomistic paradigm of subjectivity and performing a version of selfhood that is extended, porous and unbounded (Blackman, 2012) – nonmodern.

Peter, an advanced meditator who practiced according to the Indo-Tibetan tradition of Buddhism for many years and recently became interested in Thich Nhat Hanh's approach, shared a rich description of the experience of emptiness/vacuity or *sunyata*¹⁶⁹, exemplifying a nondual, formless experience of the world:

“If we don't verify what we often think to exist, the experience of the non verification of a solid entity, of what we call the mind, the absence of the experience of a form, a frontier, a limit, a demarcation between mind and no-mind, that experience is what in the Indo-Tibetan tradition is called vacuity. And at the same time, that is what we call luminosity. The discovery that the mind is an open space, formless, but at the same time it has a quality of self-awareness, it has the ability to experience that same absence of form, and that is the discovery of the deepest nature of the mind. From that moment on, the practice of meditation becomes more subtle. Instead of focusing our attention or calming our mind focusing it on the body, physical sensations, the experience of the breath, the observation of thoughts or focusing the attention on an external phenomenon, we can focus our attention on that same experience of vacuity, that luminosity, on the experience of the nonsubstantial nature of consciousness. And that is what I think is one of the most interesting experiences that meditation can offer us. In that experience, what I think is an important aspect, with plenty of consequences on our lives, is that we directly verify that the mind lacks duality between subject and object, that there is no separation between mind and what it perceives, there is no observer and observed as isolated entities, there is a nondual experience. One has the experience that the world is inseparable from consciousness.” (Interview, Peter, May 2013)

¹⁶⁹ According to Mark Epstein, “Emptiness is the understanding that the concrete appearances to which we are accustomed do not exist in the way we imagine, an experience that the late Tibetan lama Kalu Rinpoche called an “intangible” one, most comparable to that of “a mute person tasting sugar”. In particular, it means that the emotions that we take to be so real and are so worried about do not exist in the way we imagine them.” (Epstein, 1995: 101). Thich Nhat Hanh's “Interbeing” (1997a) is another way of formulating emptiness/vacuity (see chapter V).

Peter's description of the experience of vacuity points towards a nonmodern version of the self, where consciousness is spread out through the entire world, instead of being limited by dermal boundaries. In practical terms this means that the habitual boundaries characterizing the modern self are suspended, and meditators develop new levels of sensitivity that allow them to become aware of other people's emotions and to be affected by them without the need of verbalization. This, according to Lisa Blackman, constitutes forms of affective transfer, requiring a "decoupling of memory, perception, the senses and the psyche from a bounded, singular and distinctly human body" (Blackman, 2012: 24). This implicates a transpersonal way of understanding human selves, taking into account those realms of experience enacted by contemplative practices such as meditation (but also shamanism, psychedelics drugs or hearing voices) that question fixed, static and dual paradigms of selfhood.

The increasing sensitivity of Vipassana meditators towards their environment and other people inspired Paul Solomon to write "Speaking from the Body" (Solomon, 2008), where he analyzes the phenomenological experiences of psychotherapists who engage in different types of meditation. Some of these psychologists report an increasing sense of intimacy with their clients, including the coincidence of physical sensations and emotions between therapist and patient. This indicates an increase in empathy, understood as a heightened ability to identify with other people and their emotions, as previous meditation research has suggested (Lesh, 1970; Hutcherson et al., 2008).

One of my interviewees, Rebecca, a long-term Vipassana practitioner, told me that she often has this experience with her students, becoming aware of their sensations:

"With my students sometimes I will get aware of certain sensations coming up, if they're stressed or...it's like a bit if I'm getting an early warning signal of how they might be feeling, or if some anger is coming up. I think it's a bit of like attuning for vibrations, you can sort of like get other people's vibrations, and then a sensation comes and you're like hum...all different types of sensations can come. Yeah...being aware of that can give you some kind of indicator of watching how you're behaving with people." (Interview, Rebecca, April 2012)

This example suggests that meditation can enact a nonmodern paradigm of the self, allowing humans to become sensitive towards others' emotions, feeling them without the need of dialogue. According to Rebecca, this affective transfer happens due to her attuning, her receptivity towards vibrations. Daniel Stern, a psychologist who studied infants, suggests that, when children are nine months old, a new form of interaction between child and mother emerges - mothers reinforce children's behaviour by speaking with a particular tone, imitating the child's movements by nodding the head or matching their vocal efforts with the infant's attempt to reach a toy. Stern defines affect attunement as the "performance of behaviors that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state without imitating the exact behavioral expression of the inner state" (Stern, 1985: 142). In the case of Rebecca, what is at stake is not the reinforcement of behaviour through a particular vocal or bodily performance but the development of the ability to feel other people's emotions, due to the heightened sensitivity that Vipassana generates. Much of Vipassana's training deals with the awareness of sensations, and according to Rebecca this heightened sensitivity also allows her to become aware of what others are experiencing. The following episode was shared by another interviewee, Jane, and took place in Plum Village during walking meditation:

"I remember we were walking...and we were doing outside walking meditation...and there were loads of people, and I think I was kind of being a bit vacant and all smiley, isn't this great and wonderful, and it ended up kind of...Thay walking towards me...I was in the back of the walk and he was in the front, and then we went around and...kind of...and he just looked directly at me and then there was this huge amount of suffering, I got put in touch with deep suffering, you know...sometimes it's like...usually it's like sweet...lovely...kind of a...but occasionally you get this evidence that he's Asian, you get this kind of...what's true...what's real...what's authentic...so it was peculiar, because I kind of got plunged into...I mean...it was something about...I think maybe I wasn't in touch with really, with what was going on within me, that underneath this kind of nice lovely...into this kind of fake smile thing...and out of touch with really kind of what's going in...so that was an interesting encounter ... I think maybe, and Thay, in his life, has encountered a huge amount of suffering, so...whether it was...I don't know what happened there, but I got kind of rather plunged within....I think it was a wake-up call." (Interview, Jane, April 2011)

Jane's experience affected her tremendously, and after she recalled it she started crying. Thich Nhat Hanh's gaze allowed her to be in touch with suffering, becoming a "wake-up call" that reminded her not only of her own suffering but also of what Thay went through in Vietnam (see chapter VIII). This episode strengthens the assumption that meditation can deepen the connections between selves and others, contributing towards a picture of nondual subjectivity, exemplifying a phenomenon of affective transfer between two practitioners. Sometimes the abandonment of duality between self and others arises as part of a process of connection with ancestors. Michael told me that now he feels an increased connection with members of his family, namely with deceased ones:

"I have felt strong connections with members of my family, blood family, from previous generations, and more recently with my father who died last year, and so...you know...this...having the ancestors' shrine, for example, in the meditation hall, where we practice is a reminder, if you like, to maintain that connection with our historical continuation." (Interview, Michael, May 2011)

These new connections reveal a wider, more encompassing paradigm of selfhood, reinforced by the collective nature of practice (see chapter V), indicating a picture of subjectivity that goes beyond dermal boundaries. In some cases, those who underwent traumatic episodes rely on the practice of meditation to come to terms with these situations, identifying with the aggressors. Judith Toy's sister-in-law and her two teenage nephews were murdered by a disturbed young man, and her spiritual journey was a long term process of forgiveness in order to cope with the suffering caused by the assassinations. Eventually, and after many years of practice, one day she felt the urge to write a poem about the crime. During the writing, she experienced a process of identification with Charles, the murderer, feeling the rage, hatred and other strong negative emotions that he experienced while killing her three relatives. After the phenomenon of emotional identification with the killer she was finally able to forgive him:

"As I finished the last line, I was convinced that Charles had been completely out of his body and mind when he killed my family. That was the very day I stopped casting him as a beast and visualized him as a

boy in whom something had gone terribly wrong. The pain of my resentment vanished on the spot. Despite my mindfulness practice, for years I had been trapped in fear and blame. Suddenly I understood that he was not a monster, but possibly a good boy who had become – for reasons I will never know for sure – a beast that night. This was not a dark revelation; it was suffused with light, a kind of *bodhi* or awakened moment.

So what I experienced was luminescence, in part a fruit of five years of sometimes very reluctant mindfulness practice.” (Toy, 2011: 166)

Judith’s practice of meditation was also a process of healing, and she was able to overcome the distinction between herself and the aggressor by writing a poem¹⁷⁰. The continuous practice of mindfulness allowed her to come to terms with the violent episode that shook her personal life, and she identified with the killer and the emotions that motivated his act.

This wider, nondual and nonmodern paradigm of the self suspends all established distinctions between self and others, suggesting that “relationality and affect are firmly located in relation to the more-than-one, plural character of beings, and the contingency of all becomings” (Venn, 2010: 153). This decentred relationality also suspends deep rooted dualisms between humans and edible, raw matter. Eating meditation requires the identification between self and those heterogeneous networks involved in food production (see chapter V) and Neil’s words illustrate this process of becoming-food, supporting a picture of extended and decentred selfhood:

“If I eat a pig... I am actually one with the physical, real, scientifically understood worldview that there is a supply chain of pigs coming to me, and if I eat that I am completely one with all those causes and effects that are involved within that process, and I am anyhow, but the question is, do I want to increase or decrease that, so when I’m eating, becoming aware of my eating, I’m becoming aware of all the physical processes in which I’m involved and trying to take a mindful approach towards them.” (Interview, Neil, February 2011)

By reinforcing the awareness towards couplings between humans and nonhumans, meditation contributes to enact what some authors in Deep

¹⁷⁰ A similar process was undertaken by Thich Nhat Hanh (See Hanh, Hanh, 2005: 77-78).

Ecology have called the comprehensive self (Naess, 1984; 1995) or the ecological self (Devall, 1995), triggered by processes of identification with nonhumans. These phenomena bring forth a nonmodern version of human-environment couplings, reminding us of Peter's remarks on nonduality at the beginning of this section. In the following chapter, I will explore how this unbounded paradigm of selfhood is linked to new ways of performing human and nonhuman couplings, affecting environmentalism.

This extended version of the self, linked to forms of identification with other humans and nonhumans, constitutes a nonmodern paradigm of subjectivity, challenging dual accounts of selfhood. Neil's words also allow us to distinguish between two modalities of empathy. On the one hand, the awareness fostered by meditation allows Rebecca and Jane to be affected by students or spiritual teachers – this is a referential type of awareness, focusing on one entity. On the other hand, Neil's example and Peter's words at the beginning of this section point towards a nonreferential type of empathy, not limited to a single object but spread out through the world, pervading “the mind of the experiencer as a way of being.” (Halifax, 2014: 122)

We have seen, in chapter VI, how meditation alters the perception of body and mind, unleashing nondual experiences. Meditation suspends dominant ordinary states of consciousness, as well as the bounded, dualist version of the self, allowing practitioners to experience others' emotions and to become aware of and affected by processes that take place beyond their individuality. In this section, I explored how one can be affected by others in new ways, prompting phenomena of identification that suspend the divide between self and others – Judith Toy was able to identify with a killer and Neil told me that when eats he becomes that heterogeneous process comprising humans and nonhumans.

The practice of meditation challenges modern, mechanical and restrictive accounts of reality and of what humans can do, transforming one's Umwelt. The aim of the following section is to analyze some of the nonstandard phenomena that meditation, as nonmodern technology, unleashes.

VII.III.III NONSTANDARD PHENOMENA

The third aspect reinforcing the nonmodern dimension of meditation deals with the expansion of the range of possibilities available to humans, what they can do in the world. Although I elaborated on mystical experiences in chapter VI, in this section I argue that practices of meditation can unleash what Pickering (1995) calls nonstandard human performances. Spinoza (1995) asked what a body can do. In this case I suggest that meditation can contribute to a more encompassing and wider range of human possibilities, challenging positivist and reductionist understandings of time and space. This means that the installation of new automatisms transforms the meditator's Umwelt, allowing him to experience the world in novel ways.

The accounts of extraordinary abilities developed by ascetics can lead us to question the boundaries between spirituality and transhumanism (see, for example, Murphy, 1992 and James, 2007). In the Yoga Sutras one finds a number of supernormal abilities, or *siddhis*, that can be attained in advanced stages of practice. According to Dean Radin, there are three categories of abilities that can emerge: exceptional mind-body control; clairvoyance (gaining knowledge without the usual constraints of time and space or the senses, including precognition and telepathy) and psychokinesis, influencing matter with the mind (Radin, 2013: 109).

A modern Vipassana meditator, Dipa Ma, supposedly developed an incredible range of abilities including "dematerialization, body-doubling, cooking without fire, mind-reading, visitation of the heaven and hell realms, time travel, knowledge of past lives, and more." (Schmidt, 2005: 39). John E. Coleman, a student of U Ba Khin, once experienced his teacher's transmission. U Ba Khin told him, after John left Burma to return to the U.S., that there would be regular transmissions of his vibrations during certain periods of time. If the *anicca* level was high, if John was experiencing impermanence through physical dissolution, it would be possible to tune in to those transmissions. John felt that he benefited from them:

“I found quite genuinely that the “tuning in” procedure worked; I felt waves of strength entering my mind and my being and can certainly vouch for the greater depth of my meditation at the prescribed times than at other times. I felt U Ba Khin had made a discovery to which modern science might with advantage turn its analytical attention.” (Coleman, 2004: 180)

Alexandra David-Neel, in her book “Magic and Mystery in Tibet” (David-Neel, 1997), also reports a number of “powers” attained by Tibetan practitioners she met, such as telepathy, telekinesis, walking for days in a trance without stopping or even heating the body through meditation (sometimes sitting naked on the snow in freezing temperatures).

These phenomena indicate that meditation can increase the human potential, allowing humans to access realms of experience and reality prevented by modern selfhood. Most of the meditators I interviewed were reluctant to address these issues due to their “exotic” dimension; however, after I turned off my recorder, they would often mention some “strange” episode that they associated with meditation. For instance, Paul told me that he started practicing mindfulness with his mother, shortly after she was diagnosed with cancer (fortunately, she has recovered and is now well). After a period of time, he decided to visit Plum Village, but unfortunately his mother wasn’t able to join him. In Plum Village, the lay practitioners were asked to collectively prepare a song dedicated to their mothers that was afterwards sung to the whole community. At night, Paul called his mother and she asked him if something particular had happened at a particular period of time, because she had felt a warm feeling throughout her body – coincidentally, it was when Paul and other lay practitioners were singing. Another example, shared off-record, was given by Rebecca. During her last 20-day retreat she was meditating (as one should expect) and the AT’s were calling practitioners to meditate with them for a while, as it usually happens. Suddenly, she felt a warm energy throughout her body, and shortly after she was called by the AT – according to her, what she was feeling was the Metta energy that the ATs generated towards her, while reading her name, and she was able to feel it as vibrations throughout her body.

I will not speculate if these episodes and abilities arise naturally in monastic settings or as a result of long-term practice, although I was frequently told that Plum Village was a “crazy place” (indicating that abnormal episodes could take place due its particular psychogeography). In one occasion, one of the interviewees shared an episode of telepathy he experienced with a monk in Plum Village, and I was fortunate enough to record it:

“It happens to me a lot, I project questions and people...they start answering like...it’s weird stuff! ... I had this thing with one of the elder brothers, at lunch, and I just had...I was thinking about...maybe I should shave my head, just to get rid of the hair, it’s refreshing you know, and he said: Yeah, maybe you should shave your head...” (Interview, Brad, February 2011)

After presenting the cases of Paul, Rebecca and Brad, I would like to explore a couple of episodes that happened to me and that can also contribute towards a nonmodern understanding of what humans can experience through meditation.

On the third day of my first Vipassana retreat, my mind suddenly started checking if everything was ok at home. Then, out of the blue, a voice (similar to my mother’s) told me that my grandmother had passed away. This was a particularly strong experience, because that voice was strange, and I had the clear intuition that it was coming from somewhere else, it wasn’t a product of my imagination. When the retreat was over and I was able to contact my family, I was told that my grandmother had actually died.

The second example concerns an experience I went through after attending my second retreat in Plum Village in December 2011. In early January 2012, I was in Portugal and I was leaving the house of a family member. I looked at a van and I saw what looked like Michael Jackson’s (the famous American singer) ghost in the passenger seat. I didn’t understand why my mind was creating such an awkward vision. Shortly after, and back in England, I was talking to a friend of mine who had been in Plum Village and he told me that one of the brothers there had died recently. This happened to be the monk who moderated one of the meetings I attended (a Dharma sharing). He told us that he was writing some songs inspired by Michael Jackson, and that the spirit of

the singer was often felt in Plum Village. After my friend told me about his death I connected the dots and realized that the vision I had in Portugal could be some sign of this brother's death.

What should we make of all this? First, we are dealing with a radically different way of experiencing the world, confirming nonmodern ontologies such as Interbeing, suggesting that all entities are entangled and that the practice of meditation can alter one's Umwelt, allowing individuals to become aware and experience this profound relationality. Since everything is entangled, it is possible to become aware of events that are taking place thousands of miles away, to communicate with those in other parts of the world without the need of solid-state technologies and to experience consciousness as extended beyond the brain and the body. This implicates a nonmodern understanding of ontology, of what the world is and what it can do, inviting us to revise mainstream versions of causality. According to Mansfield:

“The modern scientific view, beginning in the sixteenth century with Kepler and Galileo, developed an idea of causality as the inexorable unfolding of impersonal mechanical laws... As this understanding of causality became more entrenched, many found themselves trapped in a mechanistic universe without meaning. We developed the notion of causality and then became bound by it.” (Mansfield, 1995: 46)

According to Grof, transpersonal experiences, including episodes of synchronicity¹⁷¹, such as those I apparently experienced, challenge traditional, modern Western understandings of physics, namely linear causality; however, such Newtonian picture of time and space has now been “replaced by the strange wonderland of quantum-relativistic physics full of baffling paradoxes.” (Grof, 1998: 234). Grof argues that new paradigms in physics confirm the possibility of transpersonal phenomena and, according to some authors, have close connections with Eastern philosophies (see, for example, Capra, 1975 and Bitbol, 1999), eliciting the links between spirituality and nonmodern

¹⁷¹ According to Jung, synchronicity should be understood as an acausal connecting principle, leading to the manifestation of events that are meaningfully related, yet cannot be explained by conventional accounts of causality; this indicates a plasticity of space and time and an interpenetration between mind and coincidental objective situations (Jung, 1972).

paradigms of science (Pickering, 2010). In order to take these episodes into account, one necessarily has to embrace a different view of the world. The entangled ontology of Interbeing allows us to do. Carl Jung, the western psychologist who popularized the concept of synchronicity, resorted to the scholastic and alchemic notion of *Unus Mundus*, one world, a final stage that “produces the undifferentiated world of before the Creation; in the psychic sense it is the union of the liberated and assimilated unconscious with the collective unconscious.” (Jung, 1970: 533). Buddhist worldviews, new developments in physics, systems theory (Macy, 1991) and alchemy conceive the possibility of the existence of an interconnected world, allowing the emergence of nonlinear forms of causality that question mechanistic understandings of time and space and the dualism between mind and matter. The continuous practice of meditation allows practitioners to become more sensitive to these phenomena, instead of dismissing them as absurd or irrational. As Radin argues:

“The mind is trained to become progressively more sensitive to the holistic nature of reality that we normally can’t apprehend... telepathy arises not because something is transmitted between Gail and Tom, but because from a holistic perspective the objects we perceive as “Gail” and “Tom” are not separate as they seem. At a deeper level of reality, there is no separateness, including no isolated Gails and Toms.” (Radin, 2013: 197)

Meditation allows selves to become aware of the world in a nondual way, and these phenomena are expressions of a paradigm of reality that is not marked by the usual dualisms between mind and matter or self and others, contrasting with the technologies of the modern self that fabricate dual, efficient and operative humans.

Secondly, although new paradigms seem to justify insights arising from transpersonal research, most of the Western world is still dominated by a strict understanding of what people can do and experience. Most of us are expected to follow schedules, to attend classes at a given time and place, and we are not supposed to show up at work naked, under the influence of Dimethyltryptamine or in Bangha. Although early psychological research tackled psychic

phenomena (see Blackman, 2012; Radin, 2009 and 2013), the attempt to attribute to psychology a “scientific” status resulted in the dismissal of these episodes that challenge the boundaries between the material and the spiritual. Save for few exceptions (see Schmeidler, 1970; Roney-Dougal et al., 2008; Roney-Dougal and Solfvin, 2011), meditation research focusing on the development of paranormal abilities is still underrepresented in academia.

Modern education does not focus on the cultivation of sensitivity towards these dimensions, as I have suggested in the section “Meditation and Madness”, which means that we are trained to ignore these events, preventing them from becoming part of our Umwelt. Rupert Sheldrake, who has done extensive empirical research on nonstandard phenomena, suggests that in the animal world some of these episodes are relatively common: dogs can sense that the telephone will ring or that the owner is arriving home, and can find their way back home in incredible circumstances without familiar references. Sheldrake’s argument is not that we do not have these abilities but that we have progressively lost our capacity to use them:

“Perhaps this decline in sensitivity is not so much a feature of our being human or using language, but a more recent phenomenon, a result of civilization, literacy, mechanistic attitudes, or dependence on technology. There seems little doubt that people in traditional, non-industrial communities were often more perceptive than educated people in modern industrial societies.” (Sheldrake, 1999: 226)

The Umwelt of the dual, modern self is reductive. Modern education, as a technology of the modern self, enacts a mechanistic version of the world, bounding people to a limited version of matter, time and space. This version of the self is useful to operate machines and to increase productivity, but performs a disenchanting version of the world, reduced to mere raw dead matter that can be controlled by human hubris. Meditation increases sensitivity towards nonstandard phenomena, thus contributing to expand the human potential.

Finally, these examples offer an alternative to dominant versions of technological hubris, such as transhumanism (Bostrom, 2007). Current accounts of human enhancement, including the increase of life-span and the development of all sorts of capacities, are supported by technological advances,

such as nanotechnology or biotechnology. When the notion of the Cyborg emerged (Clynes and Kline, 1995), practices such as yoga were understood as part of a new approach to adapt humans to the “hostile” environment of outer space. In STS, the Cyborg re-emerges as a product of technoscience (Haraway, 1991), suggesting that there is a contrast between two models of expanding the human potential: on the one hand, technoscience improves humans through the incorporation of material devices (such as heart bypasses), drugs or gene manipulation; on the other hand, contemplative traditions require practitioners to alter their automatisms, developing exercises and becoming performative technologies that bring forth new possibilities. They generate a number of affordances that include new levels of awareness, the ability to become more sensitive towards others’ emotions and to experience phenomena that challenge mechanistic accounts of time and space.

VII.IV CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have suggested that meditation in everyday life should not be understood according to the paradigm of religious conversion but linked to couplings between humans and technologies. Following Foucauldian and STS insights, I analyzed the application of Zen and Vipassana technologies in everyday life, supporting the enactment of equanimity and mindfulness as modes of being. I also explored three dimensions that reinforce the nonmodern dimension of meditation – new forms of awareness, the extended self and nonstandard phenomena.

I argued that the application of meditation in everyday life replaces habitual automatisms. Practitioners tend to be in the world, to deal with their selves and other people supported by meditation. These technologies are understood as mediators that perform nonmodern ways of being. Sometimes the installation of new automatisms fails, and instead of allowing individuals to perform equanimity in daily life, practices of meditation, such as Vipassana, become dangerous, leading to unwanted consequences that may include

suicide attempts.

The introduction of new plug-ins transforms the Umwelt of the practitioner, allowing her to experience the world differently, in a nonmodern way. One is no longer compelled to identify with regular habit patterns and can become aware of them. The paradigmatic dual self, whose dermal boundaries guarantee that it is separated from other humans and the world, can be suspended, and practitioners become aware of others' emotions, identifying with them. The continuity of practice can also alter regular ways of experiencing time, space, mind and matter. The episodes reported in the section "Nonstandard Phenomena" suggest that meditation increases one's sensitivity towards events ignored by the nonmeditative modern Umwelt. One's perception of the world is altered, and mechanistic and linear versions of causality are questioned.

Technologies of Zen and Vipassana are mediators that enact nonmodern paradigms of people. Following Gomart and Hennion (1999), one could say that they allow the emergence of a set of affordances that include new ways of dealing with one's emotional life, of managing particular patterns of behaviour, of interacting with people, of experiencing time, space and the world. The affordances generated by meditation, as a nonmodern equipment, reinforce the political dimension of technologies of the self. New technological mediations allow us to experience ourselves and the world differently. Dominant technologies of the self, such as discipline and modern education, offer a limited version of what we can experience and do. Meditation can suspend modern understandings of the self and the world, constituting alternative forms of subjectification. These nonmodern selves are the subjective correlate of new ways of performing wider social worlds, and practices of meditation are actively used by Vipassana and Zen assemblages to bring forth new ways of dealing with social issues. Therefore, the role of the following chapter is to explore the human-technology couplings that inform meditative ways of acting in the world, analyzing the social dimensions of meditation and its ramifications on issues such as human reformation, politics and the environmental crisis.

VIII. MEDITATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

“Social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are the two sides of a single process — the process of human social evolution.” (Mead, 1934: 309)

“It is my firm belief that the experience of higher states of consciousness is necessary for survival of the human species. If we can each experience at least the lower levels of Satori, there is hope that we won’t blow up the planet or otherwise eliminate life as we know it. If every person on the planet, especially those in power in the establishments, can eventually reach high levels or states regularly, the planet will be run with relatively simple efficiency and joy. Problems such as pollution, slaughter of other species, overproduction, misuse of natural resources, overpopulation, famine, disease and war will then be solved by the rational application of realizable means.” (Lilly, 1972: 3)

VIII.I INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters I focused on the devices of subjectification used by Vipassana and Zen assemblages, including the establishment of new webs of associations and automatisms. These devices allow the emergence of different ways of experiencing the self and the world, contrasting with ordinary states of consciousness. In order to become ways of life, Zen and Vipassana technologies become the new equipment of practitioners, who actively mediate their experience of the world through meditative technologies. The continuous application of Zen and Vipassana techniques in everyday life can lead to long term changes that challenge modern selfhood. These changes include the development of awareness towards habit patterns, the enactment of an extended version of the self and the experience of nonstandard phenomena, constituting archipelagos of nonmodern selfhood.

Zen and Vipassana assemblages go beyond the attempt to perform self-transformation, envisioning social change. So far, the various chapters explored how meditation clashes with mainstream instances of subjectification, introducing new devices to bring forth new kinds of people. This means that regular social worlds have to be suspended in order to allow selves to develop new ways of experiencing their bodies, mind and the world, transforming their Umwelt.

There is plenty of literature in social theory reinforcing the links between subjectification and broader forms of power (Foucault, 1995; Elias, 1978; Rose, 1998), associating politics with the fabrication of selves (see, for instance, chapter II, where I briefly elaborate on governmentality). The Soviet civilization in Russia required the fabrication of a new man (Sinyavsky, 1990), and peripheral European countries, currently implementing austerity politics (including Portugal, where I'm from) use devices such as the media to naturalize the idea that people should willingly become poorer in order to expiate the sins of the past, such as overspending.

The connections between technologies of the self and social order are also well exemplified in utopian and dystopian narratives. For instance, in "Brave New World" (Huxley, 1932), the drug of choice, the soma, unleashes inner experiences that are managed by the State, thus dispensing the need for external (non-state run) mechanisms of religiosity; in the "Island" (Huxley, 1962), as an example of what Huxley called the non-verbal humanities (Huxley, 1963), Moshka-medicine (a type of psychedelic drug) is widely used to generate mystical experiences: boys who want to make the transition between childhood to adolescence take it to understand the mysteries of the world. In the dystopian novel "1984" (Orwell, 1949), the main character, Winston Smith, is a heavy drinker of Victory Gin, not available to the Proles. In western societies, save for few exceptions, psychedelic substances are banned, although alcohol and pharmaceutical drugs are usually available. As we have seen in Chapter II, for Foucault the government of the self and power relations are entangled (Foucault, 2006: 252); this means that broader social orders have mechanisms to ensure the "subjectification" of individuals (such as the various technologies of power that Foucault examined) and that particular formations (such as

spiritual movements or psychological techniques) display specific views of society, clashing with subjectification devices such as compulsory education.

The entanglements between the self and the social regarding meditation and Buddhism can assume a variety of forms, such as (and these examples are far from being exhaustive) the constitution of a Buddhist social theory (Loy, 2003), forms of collective action supported by meditation (Jordt, 2007; Macy, 1983; Watts et al., 1997; Kotler, 1996; Queen and King, 1996); or the transformation of already existing social structures and institutions (such as prisons) through the incorporation of meditation (Bedi, 1998; Philips, 2008). According to Singer (1966), sociological analyses of the influence of “religion” on social change were largely influenced by Max Weber, who argued that the rise of Capitalism could be partly explained by the Protestant Ethic, implying the expansion and secularization of ascetic ideals (Weber, 1930). Although the aim of this chapter is not to refute Weber’s thesis (since I agree with some of his remarks on disenchantment and rationalization), my data suggests a different approach to tackle the couplings between Zen, Vipassana and social change.

The various examples analyzed in this chapter highlight the importance of new webs of associations, automatisms and states of consciousness regarding a number of vignettes – Vipassana in prisons, Thich Nhat Hanh, social action and environmentalism. I will deploy a post-humanist interpretation of meditation and social change, highlighting the role played by technologies of the self in various social projects, offering alternative approaches to tackle human reformation or the environmental crisis and reinforcing the connections between subjectification and social worlds.

This post-humanist approach is influenced by three major insights. First, the work of Ingrid Jordt on Vipassana and social change in Burma. Jordt argued that transformations of consciousness operated by meditation (epistemic shifts, as she puts it) are the basis for a social movement that entangles personal practice, self-transformation and social morality:

“The meditation movement as institution represents the realization of the systematization and acceptance of techniques of meditation meant to create the necessary epistemic shift that will lead to a right-mindedness. The outcome is a society-led movement that seeks to transform

consciousness and individual morality and, in the process, create an enlightened citizenry and a just society in keeping with Buddhist moral principles.” (Jordt, 2007: 210)¹⁷²

Although Jordt also mentions the role of morality, her approach recognizes the importance of transformations of consciousness and techniques of meditation in order to operate social change, instead of focusing exclusively on “ideas”. The second insight concerns Petteri Pietikainen’s notion of psychological utopianism:

“A form of social dreaming in which the attainment of an ideal state of consciousness requires the employment of psychological insights and methods that are effective in transforming the human personality and, thereby, the whole of society and culture.” (Pietikainen, 2007: 16)

According to Pietikainen, psychological utopianism is supported by four assumptions – inner transformation, the interrelation between the structure of society and personality, an anthropological conception of illness and an anti-historical mentality (Pietikainen, 2007: 20). Pietikainen’s remarks can be applied to the study of meditation. We are dealing with practices that aim at reshaping the self through the alteration of habitual webs of associations, displaying forms of social action that reflect the links between subjectivity and society.

Finally, and in order to reinforce the post-humanist “gaze” running through this chapter (and dissertation), my argument is also supported by Pickering’s (2010) reflections on cybernetics, suggesting that these nonmodern technologies also contributed to rethink the dynamics of the social world, including the transformation of psychiatric institutions (see chapter II).

¹⁷² A similar argument can be found in Macy’s work on the Sardovaya Self-Help movement in Sri Lanka (Macy, 1983). Drawing upon the notion of dependent co-arising, *paticca samuppada*, Macy suggests that the Sardovaya movement is influenced by a particular ontological understanding, coupling social and self development: “Because reality is seen a dependently co-arising, or systemic in nature, each and every act is understood to have an effect on the larger web of life, and the process of development is perceived as being multidimensional.” (Macy, 1983:33)

I suggest that the associations between meditation and social change should be understood as an extension of the devices of subjectification of meditation. This means that meditation assemblages translate social worlds into their technological correlates - according to Zen and Vipassana, the technologies of the modern self are inextricably entangled with the “problems” of the modern world, including deficient mechanisms to tackle human deviance, permanent war between opposing parties and the destruction of the environment. The “causes” of these problems lie in modern automatisms and webs of associations. In order to overcome them, technologies of meditation need to be deployed, transforming the world through the management of subjectivities. This model of social change relies on the intertwinement between selves and the world, and meditation becomes a mediator to perform a different version of the social that can emerge through the establishment of new webs of associations, automatisms and states of consciousness. The self becomes a microcosm of the world, whose dynamics can and should be altered through practices of meditation.

In order to explore these associations, this chapter will focus on three paradigmatic examples of the links between meditation and social change: the conduction of Vipassana courses in prisons, implying a redefinition of the disciplinary institution through the introduction of new actants and automatisms, understanding deviance according to the reactive model of nonmeditative subjectivity (see chapter V); Thich Nhat Hanh’s approach towards social change and the relationship between meditation and ecology – I analyze the links between Thich Nhat Hanh’s movement and environmentalism, including the establishment of the Happy Farm in Plum Village. I also explore two vignettes that exemplify how meditation is used to tackle the environmental crisis – first, I focus on a practice developed by John Seed and Joanna Macy called “The Council of All Beings”, whose aim is to alter dominant anthropocentric couplings between humans and the environment; second, I analyze the establishment of an environmentalist political party in Portugal, examining the role played by meditative experiences and ways of being in reshaping political action.

VIII.II VIPASSANA IN PRISONS

VIII.II.I INTRODUCTION

The first example I will explore concerns the introduction of Vipassana in prisons across the world, as an attempt to foster institutional transformation through meditation. According to Kornblum, prisons have three main functions: deterrence, rehabilitation and retribution (Kornblum, 2008, 204). Following Foucault (1995), the prison is a device for the normalization of deviant individuals, submitted to spatial, technological and legislature apparatuses that should produce more obedient and productive selves. Although ideas of normalization and reformation are already questionable, since they justify the manipulation of bodies and minds (sometimes through violent means), in practice prisons often become highly dystopian social systems that blatantly fail at “improving” people, rather becoming “schools for crime” (Califano, 1998).

The apparent inability of prisons, as social institutions, to *work*, seems to be illustrated by the usually dysfunctional relationships between inmates and prison staff. The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted in 1971, simulated a prison environment with shocking results: those who were playing the role of guards became highly cruel, and the experiment had to be stopped, suggesting that the prison environment leads to sadistic behaviour towards inmates (Haney et al., 1973). More recently, the de-humanization processes linked to prisons (expanding Goffman’s remarks on processes of mortification, see Goffman 1968) have been illustrated by the leaked photos of torture and abuse of prisoners in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib and the images of the alleged “terrorists” in Guantanamo: there, the process of de-humanization reached an

extreme - “The detainees were wearing blacked out goggles, leg shackles, three-piece suits and ear muffs. Some had gloves on.”¹⁷³

It was against this background of violence, shock and torture that often characterizes prisons that Vipassana was introduced in Indian prisons, in 1975, at the Central Jail of Jaipur. Shri Ramsingh Chauhan, Home Commissioner-cum-Home Secretary of the Government of Rajasthan had participated in a Vipassana course some months earlier and decided to try it to rehabilitate “criminals” (Vidyalankar, 1977).

After this first course, Vipassana was introduced in many other prisons across India and in countries such as Taiwan, Thailand, Nepal, the USA, New Zealand and Britain (Hetherington, 2003: 110). The success of these courses led the Indian government to recommend them in prisons across the country – since 1994, approximately 26 prisons are conducting Vipassana courses regularly. This phenomenon has permeated popular culture due to the production of a number of documentaries (see chapter III).

The co-emergence of modern prison alongside the birth of the human sciences (Foucault, 1995) transformed imprisonment into an ongoing experiment for the rehabilitation of the soul. However, the telos of modern technologies to counter deviance was normalization, ideally able to produce efficient, productive and obedient subjects. Vipassana, when implemented in prison settings, becomes a tool for the integral development of the individual, fostering awareness towards emotions and supporting the introduction of new automatisms that should allow selves to overcome reactivity, becoming aware of themselves.

¹⁷³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/28/world/meast/guantanamo-guard>
(Retrieved: 12/09/2013)

VIII.II.II VIPASSANA AS SELF-REFORMATION

The introduction of Vipassana in prisons is linked to an understanding of total institutions as prompting self reformation, moving away from pre-modern mechanisms of punishment and deliberate infliction of pain and from the modern appropriation of prison as a normalizing device. Vipassana envisions forms of reformation that aim at the totality of the individual, including his/her spiritual life.

Kiran Bedi became the new Inspector General of Tihar Jail in India in 1993, and she soon found out that it was a hellhole. In her book “It’s Always Possible” (Bedi, 1998), she describes many of the problems the institution was facing when she first got there: the prison was overcrowded; inmates did not have access to free healthcare (the medical staff was insufficient) or drinking water and they had to pay for food; corruption was rampant because the staff was underpaid; gang-related violence was frequent and physical violence was systematically used by the guards; the place was infested with rats and insects; bureaucracy was highly disorganized, since most of the records were lost or archived in places taken over by pests. In sum, the prison was a filthy place where one could easily be killed by humans or diseases. After taking care of some of the organizational and health issues, Bedi realized that inmates’ minds had to be transformed in order to continue the process of institutional transformation, and she wished to possess “a magical therapy to help the inmates rid themselves of corrosive emotions.” (Bedi, 1998: 192)

Bedi was basically looking for a magic bullet. According to Whitaker, the magic bullet model in psychiatry relies on two particular premises: “First, identify the cause or nature of the disorder. Second, develop a treatment to counteract it.” (Whitaker, 2010: 29). After identifying the cause of the disorder (corrosive emotions) Vipassana is introduced as a set of spiritual performances that reshape one’s subjectivity. The transformation of the inner dynamics of the prison illustrates a shift to the paradigm of integral reformation, helping inmates to deal with emotions. However, the justifications for its introduction can vary, being eventually linked to dominant narratives concerning the figure of the

“productive citizen”, as put by Dean McGuire, the Security Operations Manager of the North Rehabilitation Facility in Seattle, in the documentary “Changing from Inside”:

“If you want people to change themselves, if you want inmates to stop being inmates and become productive citizens, I believe that the resident inmates have to...it’s on them, and what we can do is provide a way for them to look at themselves, to look at their cravings and try to change what’s wrong.” (Dean McGuire, Changing from Inside, 1998)

Although the risk of co-option is present (as we have seen in chapter VII, an important dimension of the critique of modern meditation is that it has been co-opted by neo-liberal regimes to foster well-being and quality of life, thus turning people more docile), the introduction of Vipassana meditation in prisons can also be interpreted as an attempt to foster more integral forms of education, including the awareness towards the body and emotions, involving the recruitment of techniques that should ideally bring about personal change. Before the first Vipassana course in 1975, other technologies of the self, such as Yoga and Pranayama (Iyengar, 1985), had already been implemented in the West (Vidyalankar, 1977), and Lucia Meijer, the Jail Administrator of the North Rehabilitation Facility in Seattle, had introduced courses on critical thinking, self-esteem, parenting, acupuncture, Tai Chi and stress reduction (Bedi and Meijer, 2008: 311).

VIII.II.III RECONFIGURING THE CARCERAL SPACE

In order to introduce Vipassana in prisons, spatial and material devices have to be carefully put in place to reproduce the retreat assemblage (analyzed in chapter IV) as accurately as possible, re-enacting the various webs of associations that constitute Vipassana’s psychogeography.

In the documentary “Changing from Inside” we learn that the course participants had to be separated from other inmates, requiring their own dormitory and exercise area and the staff had to learn a vegetarian menu to

prepare a special diet for them. A soundproof wall was built for the meditation hall, a unit usually used for office space and class rooms was transformed into a residence, offices were converted into dormitories, the space had to be separated according to the various areas of the retreat, such as sleeping areas, server areas, etc.. Since the participants already belonged to a total institution prior to attending the course, security was integrated into the program, in order to maintain habitual procedures. The head count procedure had to be conducted with minimal distractions for the sake of concentration, therefore a member of staff, Ben Turner (also a Vipassana practitioner) served as the program manager, establishing a link between the logics of power of two assemblages: the prison (the host facility) and the Vipassana retreat. This elucidates the complexities of introducing Vipassana into a disciplinary institution.

The retreat depends on a variety of actants, such as video and audiotapes, cushions, vegetarian food, bells that signal transitions in the schedule, etc.. In the documentary "Dhamma Brothers" there is an interesting passage when the two Assistant Teachers are arriving and settling in. After unfolding their sleeping bags and preparing the room they were going to share, there is an image that I found particularly interesting, the box with the dozens of audio tapes with Vipassana instructions:

ILLUSTRATION 3- STILL OF "DHAMMA BROTHERS", 2007, MINUTE 19.



This box (illustration 3) belongs to a mobile assemblage that can penetrate all imaginable spaces, including prisons, supported by a variety of *actants* that perform meditative dispositions, as we have seen in chapter IV. The carceral space has to be filled with these material agents, including audio and videotapes, immutable mobiles (Latour, 1987) that materialize the practice of Vipassana.

A post-humanist understanding of social applications of meditation recognizes that these are entangled with the alteration of human automatisms and webs of associations, clashing with dominant carceral psychogeographies, and any incident that breaks this network can jeopardize the continuation of the retreat. Such incidents are not uncommon. In 1994, a course for about a thousand inmates was organized in the Tihar Prison, and the meditation hall consisted of a giant tent. In the documentary “Doing Time Doing Vipassana”, we learn that some hours after the beginning of the retreat a severe rainstorm took place and the tent collapsed, with all the rugs and cushions getting soaked. The course was on the verge of being cancelled, but instead the participants continued meditating in their barracks, and when the weather cleared up the organizers started rebuilding the infrastructure - by the evening, the meditation hall was rebuilt and the course went on.

The introduction of new actants, constraints and a diversity of forms of spatial reconfiguration support the implementation of a new psychogeography. This also extends to the habitual hierarchical distinction between those in power (guards, warden, etc.) and the inmates. According to Vipassana, these hierarchical distinctions are artificial. In chapter V, we have seen how Vipassana performances are deployed to transform regular automatisms, that are understood as linked to the craving/aversion mode of existence. In “Doing Time Doing Vipassana”, there is a sentence that illustrates this universal “condition”, not discriminating between prisoners and guards: “we are all prisoners undergoing a life sentence in prison by our own mind”¹⁷⁴. Since the lack of awareness towards one’s habit patterns is universal, Vipassana disrupts commonly held assumptions about the radical separation between those in

¹⁷⁴ The author of this sentence is not identified, it could be Goenka; nevertheless, it is a faithful expression of the “spirit” of Vipassana.

power and those serving a sentence, and the hierarchical organization of the Prison is also reconfigured.

In practical terms, this means that Vipassana in prison can only be implemented if those in charge are (or become) meditators: only if they are willing to alter their own subjectivity they can implement Vipassana as a collective mechanism for self-transformation. Before deploying the 10-day Vipassana course at the North Rehabilitation Facility in Seattle, Lucia Meijer, the Jail Administrator, had to attend her first retreat at the Washington Centre, and in Tihar some of the staff also participated in the first course held in November 1993 (Hetherington, 2003: 124). Moreover, suggestions to use “Vipassana” as a device for reformation can come from those lower in the prison hierarchy – it was a guard who told Kiran Bedi that Vipassana could be the “magical therapy” she was looking for. This alteration of power relations between inmates, guards, staff members and director is linked to the transformation of the correctional facility into a Vipassana centre. Tihar Central jail even receives members of the public to meditate when other Centres are full, leading Bedi to suggest that instead of a prison it is now a monastery: “Our prison has almost become a monastery. It’s a monastery that is full of joy and happiness, internal joy and internal peace.” (Bedi and Meijer, 2008: 313)

VIII.II.IV IMPACTS

Several studies have been conducted on the “impacts” of these prison courses, including the first course conducted in Jaipur in 1975. Independent “scientific studies” on the impacts of Vipassana on the 114 prisoners were conducted by Dr. T. K. Unnithan, Head of the Department of Sociology of Rajasthan University, and his colleagues and Kusum Shah, Lecturer at the College of Social Work in Nirmala Niketan, Mumbai. According to these studies, a variety of promising benefits were noticed (Vidyalankar, 1997)¹⁷⁵. Recent

¹⁷⁵ Decrease in blood pressure for those suffering of high blood pressure; relief of mental tensions; various prisoners gave up smoking; those suffering from

research suggests a decrease in substance use, alcohol-related problems and psychiatric symptoms and an increase in positive psychosocial outcomes (Simpson et al., 2007; Bowen et al., 2006).

Although these studies draw on a set of categories that presuppose moral judgments (thus being permeated by broader logics of power/knowledge, including statistical forms of reasoning) on aspects such as drug or alcohol consumption, violence and “abnormal” states of consciousness (such as psychotism)¹⁷⁶, they indicate that the introduction of Vipassana in prisons can lead to the transformation of inmates.

The personal narratives provided by inmates who engage in meditation, in the book “Dhamma Brothers” (Philips, 2008), have strong similarities with my findings on the transformative power of meditation (see chapters VI and VII).

James George spent most of his life incarcerated, reminding us of Foucault’s characterization of the delinquent’s life as a “disciplinary career” permitted by the emergence of the carceral archipelago (Foucault, 1995). The

chronic headache, stomach-ache or constipation reported total or partial relief; negative emotions (such as hatred or vengefulness) were magically replaced by a general feeling of friendship and goodwill; after the course, productivity in the industries of the jail went up; many prisoners decided to live peaceful, pure lives in the future. (Vidyalankar, 1997: 53)

¹⁷⁶ Davidson, following Foucault, suggests that the construction of sexual perversion by medicine is closely linked to morality: “It is not that medicine simply took over the study of what had once been a part of morality; moral deviation did not merely transform itself into disease. Instead, the moral phenomenon of the perversity of the will furnished a point of reference that both opened the way for and provided an obstacle to the medical constitution of perversion.” (Davidson, 1987: 48). Meditation research seems to reproduce this moral bias by explicitly distinguishing between destructive and healing emotions (see Goleman, 1997 and 2004), and the reported benefits of the introduction of Vipassana in prisons are also permeated by terms such as “positive psychosocial outcomes” or by an understanding of drug and alcohol consumption as inherently negative. This leads to the reproduction of moral prejudices and to the naturalization of legislative formations, implicitly supporting the persecution of particular substances and of those who use them. Moreover, recidivism studies, focusing on the statistical analysis of those who commit crimes after attending Vipassana courses in prison (see Parks et al., 2003), link the “overall positive impact” (Parks et al., 2003: 3) of meditation courses to a reduction of substance abuse and psychoticism, reverberating dominant moral and legal discourses.

reasons for James' incarceration were alcohol and drug related crimes, and in almost 40 years he has only been outside an institution for 25 months (Philips, 2008: 40). In a letter, he wrote that:

“The changes I've noticed within myself made a remarkable difference in the way I view things (equanimity). I'm able to deal with situations more calmly than before because now I can see everything in a better perspective.” (Philips, 2008: 85-86)

This process of transformation is consistent with the pattern of changes identified in the subjects I interviewed. The transformation of automatisms, that in some cases can lead to the development of emotions such as all-encompassing love, kindness and compassion, is exemplified by the words of Omar Rahman, convicted for robbery and forgery:

“I am more caring. I am kinder. I am more gentle with myself and others. I forget much easier now. I am happier ... I have perceptual skills I heretofore didn't have, especially of what was happening within me. I have skilful means to manage my experience more effectively.” (Philips, 2008: 115)

Before the popularization of Goenka-style Vipassana programs in prisons across the world, meditation courses (according to the Mahasi Sayadaw style of Vipassana) in prisons had been promoted by U Nu, the first prime-minister of Burma, in the 20th century. According to Jordt:

“The seriousness of the belief ... that individuals became incorruptible through achieving enlightenment was reflected by the fact U Nu introduced Vipassana into the prisons. Those who “passed the course” were given their permanent freedom. They were now considered trustworthy people who would not transgress against other citizens.” (Jordt, 2007: 30)

According to the documentaries and the literature, the inmates who apparently became accomplished meditators were not released following their spiritual transformation. In fact, the Vipassana program was even cancelled at the Donaldson facility in Alabama because it clashed with dominant Christian beliefs – those who wanted to continue meditating had to do so in semi-

clandestine conditions (Philips, 2008). This illustrates a clash between two ways of understanding selves. On the one hand, the Vipassana formation reduces selves to assemblages whose level of reactivity can be modified according to a particular inner gaze – “deviance”, as a state of mind, is linked to nonmeditative ways of reproducing such reactivity and can be transformed through the installation of new automatisms. On the other hand, dominant conceptualizations of deviance mobilize legal systems to criminalize particular behaviours, bounding selves to disciplinary institutions. Subjects are only allowed to leave the institution after a pre-established period of time, the sentence, revealing a crystallized understanding of selfhood, instead of a plastic and flexible one, as in the case of Vipassana. Vipassana’s social applications, following the considerations of Jordt and Macy on the entanglements between ontology, social action and meditation, rely on a particular way of understanding humans, impermanent beings whose regular automatisms can be transformed. The practice of meditation becomes the antidote for deviance linked to the craving/aversion dialectic.

Although Vipassana courses were cancelled in Alabama, they are flourishing in other American and Western institutions, and in India they are actively encouraged by political power, indicating distinct civic epistemologies (Jasanoff, 2005)¹⁷⁷ that result in different ways of understanding human reformation and of deploying mechanisms to manage it.

Regardless of the success and popularity of these courses, they exemplify a particular form of developing social change through institutional reconfiguration, evidencing the corporeality of institutions (Friedland and Alford, 1991). Vipassana assemblages are activated by actants, the management of space, constraints and assistant teachers that are able to bring forth the “retreat effect” and that alter the body of the prison in order to transform selves. Social transformation – including human reformation – is enacted through the mediation of Vipassana, requiring the re-enactment of the retreat assemblage and its webs of association in the carceral setting. The prison should become a

¹⁷⁷ Sheila Jasanoff defines civic epistemologies as “the institutionalized practices by which members of a given society test and deploy knowledge claims used as a basis for making collective choices.” (Jasanoff, 2005: 255)

faithful reproduction of the retreat centre, and inmates are transformed into Vipassana meditators, implying the emergence of new ways of understanding them and mobilizing what, in chapter V, I called standpoint psychologies, situated ways of tackling the human condition. The transformation of the prison setting generates new types of inmates, ideally equanimous towards sensations, in control of their dispositions/*sankharas* and generating metta towards other people.

Why are Vipassana courses in prison such a paradigmatic example of social change through meditation? First, it highlights the disciplinary character of Vipassana. The canonical 10-day retreat implements a set of constraints that resemble the prison setting. Likewise, nonmeditative selves are thought of as bound to eternal repetition, permanently reacting to pain and pleasure, deprived of agency, thus behaving as criminals who follow their instinctual nature and end up in jail. Second, Vipassana has a strong legislative dimension – as suggested in chapter V, the practice of Vipassana is deployed in order to see things as they truly are, objectively, according to the laws of nature, that are understood as universal. In that sense, the physical structure of prisons represents punishment, embodying the law of cause and effect - the disciplinary institution symbolizes the trap created by the human mind, bounding humans to the naturalization of regular, nonmeditative affect. In order to alter the human mind, the embodiment of prison itself has to be altered, freeing humans from attachment through the implementation of the equanimous gaze. Finally, prisons exemplify the Vipassana model of social transformation – institutional psychogeographies are transformed to allow self transformation. Other attempts to multiply this model include the organization of children courses. In such courses, children are submitted to a “soft” version of the retreat apparatus – they are able to play and talk, the courses are shorter and they only learn “anapana”.

These examples suggest that the 10-day courses are understood as a model for social change. This contrasts with Thich Nhat Hanh’s approach, as we will see in the following section.

VIII.III THICH NHAT HANH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

VIII.III.I INTRODUCTION

If the model of social transformation advocated by Vipassana relies on the adaptation of institutions (such as prisons) to the retreat assemblage, Thich Nhat Hanh advocates the skilful mobilization of mindfulness in a diversity of situations. His actions contributed towards what today is called engaged Buddhism, generating a substantial amount of scholarly literature (Kotler, 1996; Queen and King, 1996; King, 2001; King, 2009), including a special issue of “Human Architecture”¹⁷⁸.

He achieved notoriety during the Vietnam War, associating social activism with practices of meditation. It will not be possible to present in details all the relevant aspects of his actions during the Vietnam struggle (see Hanh, 1993b and King, 1996), but a brief summary will be provided.

In 1965, he founded the School of Youth for Social Service, where young people were trained to become social workers and afterwards sent to poor areas, mostly to Southern regions (Khong, 2007: 70). These students went in groups and built homes, resettled refugees, harvested and sowed crops, taught, provided medical assistance and conducted many other projects (Berrigan, 1993: 5).

Although Thay and his school didn't take part in the conflict between pro-Americans and communists, five SYSS members were abducted and shot in July 5 1967, and four of them died immediately. The communists thought the SYSS were pro-American, and the pro-Americans thought they were communists (Khong, 2007: 105), therefore they were persecuted by both sides.

During the Vietnam War, engaged Buddhism promoted nonviolent action. On the one hand, there was an extensive work done by the SYSS - feeding, rebuilding, etc.; on the other hand, there was a spontaneous emergence of

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.okcir.com/13HAVI3Su2008.html> (Retrieved: 23/07/2013)

alternative tactics of nonviolence to try to stop the war. According to Thay, Vietnamese people were not concerned with the victory of the communists or anti-communists but with the cessation of the conflict¹⁷⁹.

King identifies seven forms of Buddhist Engagement during the Vietnam War: 1) works of writers, poets, artists and composers that inspired and educated people, including Thich Nhat Hanh's poetry; 2) Collective and individual fasting¹⁸⁰; 3) Family altars were placed in the streets to block the path of tanks, a drastic action since these altars embody the familiar lineage; 4) Some people shaved their heads to look like a monk or nun, showing their support for the monastics; 5) Civil disobedience, including strikes, the refusal to participate in the War or mass resignations; 6) Aiding and protecting deserters and draft resisters; 7) Self-immolations by monastics and laypersons to awaken and educate the population (King, 1996: 335-336).

Although Thich Nhat Hanh didn't achieve the same prominence as Gandhi during the Indian struggle against British colonialism, he was particularly active in writing and speaking on behalf of peace, namely in the US (King, 2001: 160). He was particularly influential in raising the awareness on the conflict, and was nominated by Martin Luther King for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. However, the Vietnam conflict was just the beginning of a lifelong commitment to nonviolence. After the Vietnam War, he continued to be highly involved in social issues, including the rescue of the "boat people" (Vietnam war refugees) and the organization of retreats for Vietnam War veterans and for Israelis and Palestinians (see Hanh, 1993b and 2004). His approach is mediated by practices of mindfulness and by the nondual insight of Interbeing, transforming practices of meditation into a mediator to enact social activism. The equipment of mindfulness should ideally suspend the habitual divisions between members of opposing parties/countries/regions (communists and noncommunists, Americans and Vietnamese, Israelis and Palestinians), self and others.

¹⁷⁹ The fourteen precepts of Interbeing, ethical guidelines for those who join the Order of Interbeing, illustrate this concern with ideologies. The first precept reads as follows: "Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth." (Hanh, 1997a: 17)

¹⁸⁰ The monk Thich Tri Quang fasted for 100 days (Khong, 2007).

By going through the history of his social engagement, I will explore three vignettes that show us the role of meditation in social change, including the mobilization of mindfulness for social action; the role played by emotions and the connections between individual practice and collective transformation.

VIII.III.II MINDFULNESS AND SOCIAL ACTION

As the contemporary critique of modern meditation suggests, contemplative practices can be translated and applied in a variety of situations, eventually becoming a tool to increase productivity, well-being and efficiency, therefore being appropriated in ways that do not necessarily translate the intended programs of action of meditation teachers (see chapter VII). As Brian Daizen Victoria suggested (2006), Zen practices in Imperial Japan were widely used to support militarism and to transform soldiers into more effective killing-machines. Currently, the US military is also using mindfulness techniques, and some studies suggest that it increases resilience to stress, becoming a form of mind fitness (Stanley and Jha, 2009; Stanley et al, 2011). The effectiveness of meditation, demonstrated by the plethora of scientific studies currently available, turns it into an application with the potential to enhance soldiers' performance and resilience. It can help soldiers deal with "stressors" (the term used by Stanley and Jha, 2009), such as the vision of the mangled bodies of infants killed by bombs, and allow factory workers to become happier, more concentrated and efficient, conducting each task mindfully. Ron Purser and David Loy, in a recent article in the Huffington Post, suggest that we should distinguish between Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*) and Wrong Mindfulness (*miccha sati*), stressing that "the quality of awareness is characterized by wholesome intentions and positive mental qualities that lead to human

flourishing and optimal well-being for others as well as oneself.” (Purser and Loy, 2013)¹⁸¹

Although this distinction is moralist, it reinforces the importance of assessing the outcomes of mindfulness beyond the private sphere. Mindfulness is a secular translation of meditation practices, de-coupling them from traditional tenets such as community, ethical training and particular understandings of the world. As a mere “technique”, it can be used for a multiplicity of purposes, including those of contemporary neo-liberal societies and their focus on happiness (Binkley, 2011). The contemporary commodification of mindfulness contrasts with the use of meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh in order to achieve social transformation, challenging the status quo and in many occasions even risking the safety of the activists.

Firstly, mindfulness technologies were deployed to support social activists during the Vietnam War. As we have seen in the chapter VII, meditation should become an equipment that alters practitioners’ experience of everyday life. Likewise, mindfulness as a way of being supported the peace movement in Vietnam. As the young Alcibiades was told by Socrates, if he wanted to become a politician first he had to practice upon himself (Foucault, 2006) – likewise, a good social activist should be a diligent meditator. One of Thich Nhat Hanh’s early publications, “The Miracle of Mindfulness” (Hanh, 2008b), had as its original subtitle “A Manual on Meditation for the use of young activists” – those who wanted to become socially active had to cultivate mindfulness.

There are various examples that illustrate these couplings between the peace movement and mindfulness. For instance, after the previously mentioned killing of the 5 SYSS social workers, Sister Chan Khong sought refuge in mindfulness:

“For three days and nights, I could hardly sleep. I dwelled in mindfulness, reciting gathas... as I did my everyday activities: “Washing my hands, I vow to have clean hands to embrace the path of love. I pray that the

¹⁸¹ Purser, R. and Loy, D. (2013), Beyond McMindfulness. Huffington Post, 07/01/2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html (Retrieved: 14/09/2009)

thoughts and deeds of those who killed my friends will be cleansed.””
(Khong, 2007: 106)

In this case, mindfulness allowed Sister Chan Khong to maintain a compassionate attitude towards the perpetrators of the massacre. Mindfulness altered the habitual automatism of directing anger towards the aggressors and helped this activist, through the recitation of gathas, to endure these difficult times.

Secondly, mindfulness practices are also mobilized to gather those from opposite sides of the conflict, attempting to deal with it through meditation, translating social conflicts into paradigms of selfhood and their corresponding technologies, as I suggested in the introduction¹⁸². The attempt to use technologies of the self to deal with the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has already been tried at the Esalen Institute¹⁸³. Retreats for Israelis and Palestinians have been undertaken in Plum Village from 2001 onwards, promoting a mindful approach to conflict resolution. During two weeks of intensive mindfulness practice, 15 to thirty members of these two belligerent sides come together (Hanh, 2004: 11).

These retreats expand the performative approach of Plum Village to the resolution of international conflicts. As Thay states, “The White House has organized many peace talks, but the White House has never offered the practices of deep relaxation, mindful walking and mindful eating so that we can embrace our anger and fear.” (Hanh, 2004: 15)

Instead of focusing on talking, participants are invited to engage in practices to calm their emotions, taking care of their selves, installing new automatisms. When their emotions are calmed down, then they can start looking deeply into themselves and others:

¹⁸² The same process of individualization takes place in Vipassana. Goenka, in his speech to the "Millennium World Peace Summit" of the United Nations, stated that “If there is no peace in the mind of the individual, I do not understand how there can be real peace in the world. If I have an agitated mind, always full of anger, hatred, illwill and animosity, how can I give peace to the world? I cannot because I have no peace myself.” (Goenka, 2002a: 40)

¹⁸³ See Friends of Esalen, Volume 19, Issue 1, Spring 2007.

“Once we are successful in calming our emotions, we can begin the practice of listening deeply to the other person to understand his or her suffering. ... This helps others understand our situation and our suffering. ... Once communication is possible, peace will be the outcome.

At the end of the retreat, Palestinians and Israelis come together to report on the fruits of their practice and to discuss how to continue the practice when they go back to the Middle East.” (Hanh, 2004: 16)

In a situation of war, the response of Plum Village is to get the citizens of the belligerent countries together, inviting them to practice mindfulness. Technologies of meditation are therefore mobilized to create empathy between members of opposite sides, mediating social conflicts. Empathy can be developed after practitioners are able to transform their automatisms, as we have seen in the previous chapters, supporting a new approach to conflict resolution. It has strong similarities with Vipassana in prisons – in both cases, a particular social phenomenon (“criminality” or “war”) is translated into meditative models of subjectivity. According to Vipassana, habitual, reactive automatisms, result in criminality; regarding Zen, unmindful ways of living lead to anger. In both cases, social conflicts are understood according to meditative models of the self, standpoint psychologies, and are solved through technologies that transform regular automatisms. According to Vipassana and Zen assemblages, subjectivity is key to understanding social phenomena, and this is linked to the third major appropriation of mindfulness as a technology for social change.

The final aspect I will address in this section concerns the use of technologies of the self in peace marches. In those events, hundreds or thousands of people meet to walk peacefully, generating a meditative and political choreography that intertwines inner transformation, technologies of the self (walking meditation) and the quest for peace. In 1982, Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers walked in New York for nuclear disarmament:

“There were a million Americans walking together that day. We were a group of thirty people. A Zen teacher, Richard Baker-Roshi, asked me to join the march, and I said, “Will I be allowed to walk peacefully in the peace walk?” He said, “Yes, of course”. So I joined, and our group walked mindfully, and we blocked more than two hundred thousand people behind us. Strangely enough, people accepted that, and they

slowed down. Then the peace walk became more peaceful.” (Hanh, 2000: 12)

Those participating in the peace walk were altering the characteristic automatism of walking, demonstrating a different way of being that could inform nonmodern paradigms of political action. This massive choreography, coupling affective and aesthetic alterations prompted by mindfulness, exemplified an alternative way of doing politics – the self becomes a work of art (Foucault, 1991b: 350) and the assembly of hundreds or thousands of slow, mindful walkers, generates a massive performance that contrasts with the habitual anthropotechnical scenario of modern cities. The performance of walking becomes the breeding ground for new ways of being, allowing us to reflect on the connections between subjectivity and politics. This reminds us of other attempts to couple performance, politics and spirituality. Antonin Artaud attempted to enact a radical, cruel version of Theatre, beyond discourse, turning it into a ritualistic and visceral process that entangles sounds, images, movements and gestures to radically *affect* the spectator – art and performance become a technology of the self:

“If we have come to attribute to art nothing more than the values of pleasure and relaxation and constrain it to a purely formal use of forms within the harmony of certain external relations, that in no way spoils its profound expressive value; but the spiritual infirmity of the Occident, which is the place par excellence where men have confused art and aestheticism, is to think that its painting would function only as painting, dance which would be merely plastic, as if in an attempt to castrate the forms of art, to sever their ties with all the mystic attitudes they might acquire in confrontation with the absolute... to link the theater to the expressive possibilities of forms, to everything in the domain of gestures, noises, colors, movements, etc., is to restore it to its original direction, to reinstate it in its religious and metaphysical aspect, is to reconcile it with the universe.” (Artaud, 1958: 69-70)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, everyday life is a locus of power and resistance (Certeau, 1984), and these massive choreographies of walking meditation can be understood as acts of resistance through art. This

reminds us of alternative models of social transformation, including situationism (Trocchi, 1963) and politically engaged theatre (see Boal, 1979; Carvalho and Nunes, 2013). Moreover, these various examples highlight the role of emotions in activism, as I suggest in the following section.

VIII.III.III THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

According to Flam and King, emotions “connect the macro-politics to the micro-politics of social movements” (Flam and King, 2005: 3), mediating personal and collective action. Public demonstrations can assume a variety of formats: artistic performances; the destruction of property; the use of slogans and signs; shouting; sit-ins; hunger strikes; marches, etc.. According to Flam, in Western countries anger is the driving force directed at opponents (Flam, 2005: 32). One expresses anger towards the government, the IMF, the European Central Bank, NATO or the WTO.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that there should be a continuity between the intended outcome of the demonstration and its format or mode of expression. One of Thich Nhat Hanh’s books is called “Being Peace” (Hanh, 1997c). Such an expression illustrates the correlations between the mindful self and broader social aspects. The focus on emotions and the inner realm calls for a new type of political subject, one who is able to maintain mindfulness and the awareness of Interbeing, living up to the maxim: “There is no way to peace; peace is the way.” (Hanh, 1997a: 6)

This approach to political action, by emphasizing the continuity between inner and outer transformation, rejects forms of violent action; instead, these mechanisms of action, such as peace walks, are collective performances that aim at fostering emotions, such as compassion, through ahimsa, a Sanskrit word that is translated as “nonviolence” and that means harmlessness (Hanh, 1993b: 65). Peace walks can be interpreted as collective displays of

mindfulness, and they serve as an example of an alternative way of being in the world: if the individual subject can transform his or her performance through walking meditation, the same can be done for a group – in that sense, when a group of people engages in a peace march, they are showing the rest of the world that a different political direction is possible through the transformation of performance/consciousness, as I have suggested in the previous section. This reinforces the couplings between the emotional apparatus and broader political aspects, including foreign policy – mindfulness becomes a form of political reasoning, thus justifying nonviolence and pacificism.

Some of my interviewees were attracted to Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings because they realized that they represented a more integral approach to political action, without the usual dualism between subjectivity and political goals. As Jane puts it:

"That's what drawn me to this practice, because it's about engaged Buddhism, it's not just about contemplation...it's actually about being connected and engaged with the world, which...because when I was younger, I was...I had a strong sense of justice as I was out demonstrating, but it was actually an angry place to be, you know, and fury...and...I would be the person who would throw the bottles of cocktail...in terms of being violent in the name of peace...and obviously that's not actually very useful...and that's one of the gifts of the teaching."
(Interview, Jane, April 2011)

Neil, who was actively involved in Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, told me that he was fascinated when he attended a peace walk led by Thich Nhat Hanh, and that it was radically different from what he was used to in terms of political action:

"The difference and contrast was just incredible – everything was anti...anti Bush, anti war, anti... fuck Bush...signs in black and red...angry and dark atmosphere at the protest... no matter what we did nothing mattered...with the peace walk it was completely different... I was not only happy throughout it but people were...what's going on? Really coming over and checking out...reflecting on that, I realized that to really make something happen you have to act out of your positivity, out of feeling good." (Interview, Neil, February 2011)

Neil's words strengthen the assumption that we are facing a radically different form of social action – instead of being supported by anger, it is driven by what he calls “positivity”. One can obviously question the pragmatic effects of Thich Nhat Hanh's models of social action. Thich Nhat Hanh himself recognized that his endeavours in Vietnam and with the boat people were not entirely successful (King, 2001)¹⁸⁴. However, in order to “assess” the results of these models for social transformation we have to bear in mind that they rely on a relational ontology (see chapter V), suggesting that inner and outer realms are interconnected. This means that peace between nations or opposing parties cannot be achieved if selves are not maintaining mindfulness. Social change thus involves an epistemic shift (as put by Jordt, 2007), being understood according to a relational paradigm of the world that questions regular ways of understanding the effects of certain actions. The aim of the following section is to reflect on this important aspect.

VIII.III.IV INNER/OUTER CONNECTIONS

Another major trend in Thich Nhat Hanh's vision of social change concerns the entanglement between personal practice and wider social world. This was already exemplified by the application of mindfulness in various contexts, as well as by the connection between a particular way of being and political goals (such as peace between opposing parties). However, these connections are not merely symbolic, they are linked to nonmodern

¹⁸⁴ I had the chance to ask a member of one of Israel's Sanghas if the Israeli-Palestinian initiatives were successful, but he told me it was difficult to create a common ground for dialogue because Israelis were mostly concerned with family matters while Palestinians were worried about the occupation (see also Sharqaw, 2008). According to King, the apparent failure of mindfulness to achieve substantial social consequences is due to its focus on means and not ends: “Since meditation teaches a person to act without regard to consequences, one should not be surprised that social action inspired by contemplative vision is not always efficacious. The important thing is that it be carried out with integrity.” (King, 2001: 161)

understandings of causality, intertwined with meditative ontologies, as we have seen in chapters V and VII.

In practical terms this means that, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, social phenomena (such as wars) or political leaders are representations of individual consciousness. Human consciousness is understood as a microcosm of politics. We have already seen how Vipassana and Zen mechanisms of subjectification reshape usual webs of associations and automatisms to enact individual change. These webs of subjectification are not merely one-sided and material – according to Thich Nhat Hanh, individual consciousness also produces a feedback loop that influences group or world consciousness. Such a feedback loop (one is subjectified by particular social assemblages, that, in turn, are influenced by human consciousness) justifies the fact that political action has to be conducted according to mindful principles (thus rejecting Machiavellianism) because there is no distinction between individual conduct and the “outcomes” of human activity. As Hanh states:

“If we look deeply, we will observe that the roots of War are in the unmindful ways we have been living. We have not sown enough seeds of peace and understanding in ourselves and others, therefore we are co-responsible ...” (Hanh, 1993b: 66)

In this case, Hanh suggests that technologies of the self and individual practice are the “basis” of broader social aspects such as war. The same takes place regarding elected leaders – these are a reflection of human consciousness:

“You may think that the way to change the world is to elect a new President, but a government is only a reflection of society, which is a reflection of our own consciousness. To create fundamental change, we, the members of society, have to transform ourselves.” (Hanh, 1993b: 65)

These words remind us of Clausewitz’ aphorism that war is politics by other means (Clausewitz, 1989). In this case, war and politics are understood as consciousness by other means, emerging as the result of technologies of the self and ways of being. This justifies the assumption that social action has to follow principles of mindfulness. Peace marches, involving the coordinated

mobilization of hundreds or thousands of bodies, are not merely visual events but also energetic ones, involving skilful ways of redirecting collective energy in order to transform broader political spheres.

This means that, according to Thich Nhat Hanh's proposal, political and personal transformation are intertwined – the transformation of individual habit patterns thus reflects on the “collective mind”. Similar claims have been made by the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, as we have seen in chapter IV – supposedly, the continuous practice of TM can influence its environment (see chapter IV), generating the so-called “maharishi effect” (Radin, 2009). Modern and dominant ways of understanding causality obviously dismiss these assumptions: dualistic understandings of the world postulate that body and mind are two separate entities. However, there are alternative conceptions that postulate real connections between individual and broader forms of consciousness, allowing the emergence of episodes of synchronicity such as those analyzed in chapter VII. These alternative conceptions may assume a variety of terms, such as collective unconscious (Jung, 1959), noosphere (Chardin, 2004); morphic fields (Sheldrake, 2011), field consciousness (Radin, 2009), and, of course, Interbeing, contesting the “binary opposition between the individual and society.” (Carrette, 2007: 71)

In practical terms this means that individual behaviour, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is an important dimension of social transformation. An excellent example concerns the relationship between meditation and ecology, illustrating how technologies of the self are used to deal with the current environmental crisis.

VIII.IV MEDITATION AND ECOLOGY

VIII.IV.I INTRODUCTION

We could argue that modern versions of selfhood are ontologically separated from the environment, and nature is considered a standing reserve (Heidegger, 1977) whose only goal is to become raw matter. According to the disenchanting version of the world, nature is a mere set of elements arranged according to a mechanistic logic that can be controlled by the unveiling of “universal laws” as articulated in Newtonian physics. According to this version, the world is ontologically inferior to “humans” thus rendering all the nonhumans (plants, animals, minerals, etc.) to the status of mere objects that can be used to serve our needs. Animals are turned into food and clothes; the earth is drilled to fuel the engines of our cars; trees are chopped to warm us and to print books, supposedly exemplifying our “superior” culture, and while humans do all these things (including killing animals through gruesome methods) they are usually morally detached and unable to connect with nonhumans.

Ecology, understood as the set of associations between humans and nonhumans, is part of STS’ body of scholarly literature. It has been tackled from various perspectives, implicating decentred and post-humanist analyses of social systems (Callon, 1986; Pickering, 2001; Latour, 2005), the recognition of the need of new socio-technical interventions to deal with “risks” (Jasanoff, 2005; Callon et al., 2001; Beck, 1992) the deconstruction of human “identity” due its new associations with nonhumans (Haraway, 1991 and 2003) or the identification of new scientific and technological paradigms that perform nondual and collaborative relationships between humans, machines and the environment (Pickering, 2010).

Latour, in “Politics of Nature” (Latour, 2004b) offers a systematic and complex account of the parliament of things (Latour, 1991), a political model to bring the “nonhumans” to the democratic process, challenging dualistic and modern versions of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. This

includes the participation of scientists, politicians, economists and moralists who have different functions in order to represent the collective, contributing towards novel ways of thinking about the politics of nature in democratic societies:

“Democracy can only be conceived if it can freely traverse the now-dismantled border between science and politics, in order to add a series of new voices to the discussion, voices that have been inaudible up to now, although their clamor pretended to override all debate: *the voices of nonhumans*. To limit the discussion to humans, their interests, their subjectivities, and their rights, will appear as strange a few years from now as having denied the right to vote of slaves, poor people, or women.” (Latour, 2004b: 68)

I suggest that meditation can offer an interesting alternative to dominant modes of understanding the human/nonhuman divide, contributing towards Guattari’s “ecology of mind”. According to Guattari, following Bateson (1972), in order to tackle the contemporary ecological crisis it is necessary to deploy three types of ecology: the environmental, the social and the mental. New ecological archipelagos (including mental ones) must contemplate the development of new aesthetic practices – they must be supported by technologies of the self – “We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange - a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns.” (Guattari, 2000: 68)

This integral approach to environmentalism is supported by ideas emerging from the Deep Ecology Movement. We have seen, in chapters VI and VII, how meditation alters the experience of the environment, in some cases generating nonmodern experiences that include phenomena of nonduality. However, I believe that a more systematic account of the connections between meditation and ecology should be provided. In order to do so, I will analyze three examples: the deeply ecological nature of Thich Nhat Hanh’s project of the self and two vignettes that exemplify the links between meditation practice and ecology: Joanna Macy’s and John Seed’s “Council of All Beings”, a ritual that aims at allowing communication between humans and nonhumans and the formation of an environmentalist political party in Portugal.

VIII.IV.II THICH NHAT HANH AND ECOLOGY

The links between Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing and ecology are vast. I am not suggesting that Vipassana does not offer new ways of recreating the self to abandon anthropocentrism¹⁸⁵; however, with Thich Nhat Hanh the links between meditation and environmentalism are explicit, and he has written extensively on the topic (see, for instance, Hanh, 1993, 2008c and 2013). I will elaborate on four main aspects: the ontology of Interbeing; the ecological dimension of technologies of mindfulness; the role of ecology in Plum Village and the five mindfulness trainings.

First, the notion of Interbeing contrasts with modern dualistic accounts of the split between humans and the world (see chapter V). At the ontological level, there is an interpenetration between all existing entities, and this nonmodern account of the world supports ecology by questioning the "key assumptions of [the] Judaeo-Christian/Marxist/humanist tradition" (Seed, 1988: 9), including anthropocentrism. According to one of my interviewees, Ursula, Interbeing turned her ecological consciousness more "spiritual", because now she has a worldview that sustains her political involvement in environmental causes.

Second, technologies of mindfulness support a symmetrical relationship between humans and nonhumans. This includes hugging trees, contemplating the landscape, becoming aware of food chains, the weather and all the heterogeneous elements that are part of socio-spiritual networks. The awareness of Interbeing can thus be understood as an antidote to disenchanting modes of existence. These practices could, therefore, be understood as technologies of the "ecological self" (Devall, 1995), contrasting with the mainstream technologies of detachment deployed by education or the workplace that can, as I suggested in chapter VII, become anti-programs, jeopardizing the practice of meditation.

¹⁸⁵ In fact, and according to Rob, after his Vipassana course he decided that "Whenever possible I'm not going to fly anywhere because of the emissions and environment and everything" (Interview, Rob, October 2011).

Third, in Plum Village there is currently an attempt to couple mindfulness with ecology through the development of the “Happy Farm”, partly influenced by permaculture, an approach that “involves the design of sustainable agricultural systems and human habitats that mimic the patterns and relationships found in natural ecologies” (McManus, 2010:162). According to Stuart Watson, a long-term lay resident in Plum Village, the idea was to initially expand the gardens in the French Monastery in order to produce food for the community. The project started officially in February 2013. According to Stuart,

“For the first year we made a system of 32 raised beds each of about 42 metres squared growing surface. So the total growing space is something like 1300 metres squared which is quite a lot of space. By comparison my garden in Upper hamlet had around 100 metres of growing space.

Already we have had big harvests of many vegetables such as cabbage, courgette, kale, salad and more. It has been very successful so far.

We are not using permaculture principles so much although all of us are inspired by permaculture. The idea was for the first couple of years to learn how to grow a lot of food using conventional organic techniques and from there start to move slowly in the direction of even more natural and sustainable methods.” (Stuart Watson, Private Communication, June 2013)

An interesting aspect concerning the Happy Farm is that all the work is conducted in mindfulness, it is a form of working meditation (see chapter V). According to Stuart, that means that those who work there follow the schedule as much as possible, practice walking meditation, have a weekly sharing and “We all try and bring moment to moment awareness to the work we are doing, the beauty of the surroundings, and the movements of our mental formations.” (Stuart Watson, Private Communication, June 2013)¹⁸⁶

New forms of environmental intervention are actively promoted by communities teaching meditation in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, even offering courses on permaculture as part of their retreats. For instance, the School of Interbeing, in the south of Oregon, US, organized a course where

¹⁸⁶ The Happy Farm is currently accepting donations <https://fundrazr.com/campaigns/0RtH4?psid=bc6032c7b6f1474e91d62f35d34f0e99> (Retrieved: 14/09/2013).

practices of social and personal transformation were connected, including alternative ways of dealing with the environment. During the first week, students learned yoga, meditation and self massage to develop the necessary tools for self care. In the second week, the Self in Relation was explored, focusing on conflict resolution and communication. Finally, this course also encompassed the relationship between humans and nature, introducing the participants to organic gardening and permaculture (Francis, 2003: 49). This suggests that mindfulness practice is coupled with alternative modes of dealing with the environment.

Finally, the last aspect concerns the five mindfulness trainings, forms of rephrasing the five classical Buddhist precepts: do not kill, do not steal, do not consume intoxicants, do not lie, do not engage in sexual misconduct. The reformulation of the first precept (not killing), designated as reverence for life, is salient:

“Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.” (Hanh, 1993: 8)

We are facing a geocentric rather than an anthropocentric worldview where the notion of the collective is expanded to include animals, plants and minerals. This “expansion” of the ethical circle (Singer, 1981) finds echoes not only in deep ecology but also in the decentred and post-humanist articulations between the natural and the social. As the phenomenological reports of peak experiences with meditation indicate, as well as the performative alterations promoted by this regime of subjectification, the expansion of the ethical circle is linked to particular forms of experiencing the body, the environment, other humans and nonhumans. In sum, the transition from a humanist to a geocentric ethics is allowed by new webs of associations and automatisms that unveil different ways of experiencing the self and the world. In practice, this means

that some meditators become vegetarian¹⁸⁷ or vegan and, according to Kaza, “this may mean withdrawal from consumer addictions to products with large ecological impacts, such as coffee, cotton, computers, and cars” (Kaza, 2000: 168), as well as engaging in a variety of forms of environmental activism, as in the case of some of my interviewees. The role played by meditation is to radically alter dominant forms of experiencing human/environment couplings. The following two vignettes will exemplify how meditation offers alternatives to rethink these couplings. Initially, I will focus on the efforts undertaken by two meditators, Joanna Macy and John Seed, to develop tools to allow humans to experience interconnectedness - “The Council of All Beings”. Afterwards, and informed by an interview with an experienced meditator and Dharma Teacher in Portugal, I will explore how the practice of meditation influenced the creation of an environmentalist party.

VIII.IV.III THE COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS

Technologies of the self can question dominant assumptions about the human/nonhuman divide. The 20th century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi had a very close connection with animals, and there are stories about monkeys and squirrels being attracted by the strong presence of the guru of Arunachala (Devotees, 2008); similarly, St Francis, the Christian saint, is often mentioned as an example of how spirituality can foster biocentrism (Sessions, 1984). Informed by the transformations of consciousness and processes of identification prompted by contemplative technologies, two meditators, John Seed and Joanna Macy, developed a practice whose aim is to raise environmental awareness.

This practice, called “Council of All Being”, is currently enacted in workshops around the world to allow participants to abandon their skin-encapsulated ego and to identify with nonhumans, following Arne Naess’ call (1995) for a deeper, more comprehensive subjectivity. It is a meditative version

¹⁸⁷ That is my case. After my second Zen retreat, in 2011, I have been following a vegetarian diet.

of Latour's Parliament of things, drawing on the transformation of regular automatisms to enact new paradigms of selfhood.

John Seed became involved in environmental activism after a regular meditation practice, and at a certain point he had a nondual experience with the forest¹⁸⁸, thus embodying Naess' version of ecosophy as relying on the identification with nonhumans (Naess, 1995). The Council of All Beings follows this call and consists of a set of practices to overcome anthropocentrism, contributing towards a symmetrical relationship between humans and nonhumans. According to Macy and Fleming,

"The name "Council of All Beings" has come to be used in two ways. In the narrower sense, it refers to a ritual form, a council circle of one-and-a-half or two or three hours, where people gather to speak in behalf of other species. The term is also used more inclusively to refer to a longer process, one that runs from one to several days and includes exercises and activities leading up to and flowing from the ritual proper." (Macy and Fleming, 1988a: 97)

There are three phases in this council: mourning, remembering and speaking from the perspective of other life-forms (Seed, 1988: 14). Initially, one should be able to hear the cry of the Earth, as put by Macy and Fleming: "Joanna often quotes the words of the poet Thich Nhat Hanh: What we most need to do is to hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying." (Macy and Fleming, 1988a: 103). Mourning usually involves the display of sorrow and compassion towards the destruction of the environment. It can include telling eco-stories, recalling an experience where one felt the presence and pain of the environment or honouring endangered species.

The second part of the procedure involves remembering: participants should realize that they are deeply entangled with nonhumans, becoming aware of interconnectedness. This is achieved through various methods, including a process called "evolutionary remembering", where participants are asked to lie down or sit in a comfortable position and go through a guided meditation on the

¹⁸⁸ "All of a sudden, the forest was inside me and was calling to me, and it was the most powerful thing I have ever felt." (Seed: 1992)

origins of the Universe and the evolution of life. (Macy and Fleming, 1988a: 106)

Finally, the Council includes speaking for a nonhuman entity. Before doing so, one isolates him/herself in meditation to identify with a nonhuman. One can, for instance, allow a mountain to emerge (in vision, felt sense, etc.). After the being emerges, one practices meditation on the entity to become one with the nonhuman. After this process in solitude, all participants (ideally wearing masks) can be assembled and the ritual begins. When an entity wants to speak, the human representing it holds up his or her hand:

“Humans! I, Mountain, am speaking. You cannot ignore me! I have been with you since your very beginnings and long before. For millennia your ancestors venerated my holy places, found wisdom in my heights. I gave you shelter and far vision. Now, in return, you ravage me. You dig and gouge for the jewel in the stone, for the ore in my veins. Stripping my forests, you take away my capacity to hold water and to release it slowly. See the silted rivers? See the floods? Can’t you see? In destroying me you destroy yourselves. For Gaia’s sake, wake up!” (Macy and Fleming, 1988b: 87)

After some rounds of interventions, the ritual leader thanks the entities for expressing themselves and asks them to share their powers with the participants. These “gifts” can include the far-seeing-eye of the condor, the deep peace of the mountain or the fragrance of the wildflower (Macy and Fleming, 1988b: 88-89). This ritual is not an end in itself. Its aim is to form new environmental activists and to support their actions by providing them with alternatives to anthropocentric ways of being. This ritual is a practical form of combining deep ecology with technologies of the self, supporting a transpersonal picture of subjectivity¹⁸⁹, including the identification with nonhumans.

This council should produce real-world impacts - the aim of this comprehensive sense of self is to provide a “larger context for action” (Seed,

¹⁸⁹ This picture is brilliantly described by Fox: “Broadening and deepening our identification ... with the world around us leads us from a relatively narrow, atomistic, isolated, or particle-like sense of self to a wide, expansive, participatory, or field-like one.” (Fox, 1993: 241)

1988: 15). This ritual is not a substitute for action, it is an integral part of environmental activism, as mindfulness is the support of Thich Nhat Hanh's social actions. John Seed has been an active environmentalist for the past 30 years, being involved in the successful campaign to save the sub-tropical rainforest of New South Wales, Australia, having subsequently founded the Rainforest Information Centre¹⁹⁰. Ideally, the Council should allow participants to go through the same process of identification that led John to become an environmental activist – the role of this parliament is not to be a mere platform for discussion but to foster real-world action informed by the insight of interconnectedness. This initiative reinforces the role of meditation in the development of new aesthetic tools for social intervention. In the case of the Council, meditation is explicitly used to foster phenomena of identification with nonhumans and to allow participants to feel empowered and to act in the real world.

VIII.IV.IV MEDITATION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN PORTUGAL

The second example I would like to explore concerns the foundation of an environmentalist party in Portugal, led by an advanced meditator who happens to be the president of the Portuguese Buddhist Union, the largest Buddhist organization in that country. I had the chance to interview Paulo Borges, professor of Philosophy at the University of Lisbon, in May 2013. The main aim of this interview was to clarify some practical aspects of meditation as well as to understand the articulations between meditative states of consciousness and environmentalism.

Paulo Borges is currently the president of PAN – Party for the Animals and Nature, which was founded in 2009. Initially, the party was going to follow a model similar to the Dutch Party for the Animals, Partij voor de Dieren, PvdD, becoming the Portuguese Party for the Animals. However, Paulo Borges realized that a party for the animals would be restrictive, and he managed to

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/aboutthe.htm> (Retrieved: 14/06/2013)

turn it into a more holistic political project, including human and nonhuman animals as well as the environment. Although many of its members are Buddhists, this party includes subjects from various religions, and individuals are understood as embedded in a larger system that includes other humans, nonhumans and the environment.

According to the manifesto of PAN,

“The Party for the Animals and Nature supports all initiatives that aim at improving the living conditions of men, in harmony with nature and other species. The Party for Animals and Nature will support and promote in particular those actions that aim at increasing human sensitivity and consciousness regarding the obvious fact that all living beings equally seek happiness, well-being and the cessation of suffering. Consequently, the Party for the Animals and Nature serves the development of man himself, supporting the implementation of a new mental, ethical and civilizational paradigm that allows humanity to develop fraternity and solidarity with the universe and all living beings”¹⁹¹.

PAN's political programme is comprehensive, encompassing a variety of fields that include culture, the economy, the refoundation of the State, ecology, animal well-being, social policy, nutrition, agriculture, health, education, justice and the military. Some of the proposed measures include the promotion of ecological values; the dissemination of permaculture and urban agriculture; banning all patents on living organisms, including seeds, and turning Portugal into a GMO-free zone; the inclusion of animal rights in the Portuguese Constitution; the promotion of a more diversified, healthy, ethical and sustainable diet, advocating vegetarianism and the consumption of organic food.

One could argue that the aim of these various proposals is the constitution of an ecotopian society, “one that operates in interactive harmony with ecological systems, with humans and nonhuman nature mutually flourishing” (Barnhill, 2011: 126). This new version of society has implications on a variety of levels, challenging habitual relationships between humans and nonhumans, fostering new tools for self formation (prescribing dietary changes

¹⁹¹ PAN's Manifesto - <http://www.pan.com.pt/manifesto.html> (Retrieved: 12/08/2013)

and the transformation of contemporary education) and the development of new agricultural and economic paradigms. In sum, there is an attempt to produce a new man and a new social order, coupling self and world change, attributing a biocentric dimension to contemporary projects of governmentality.

I was particularly interested in understanding how meditation assemblages contributed towards the creation of this party, if new webs of associations, automatisms and experiences supported this different worldview. According to the interviewee, meditation and social change are entangled in three different ways. First, meditative states of consciousness can foster the experience of interconnectedness, allowing the meditator to experience nonduality, suspending the boundaries between self and the world:

“I have seen many people with ecological concerns starting a meditation practice, but I also see it the other way around, people who have experiences with meditation becoming interested in environmental and ecological issues, in a more encompassing ethic, including not only humans but also the environment, animals, the world...that is clear to me, and it is one of most notable and exciting aspects of meditation, that deep interpenetration between those two dimensions, meditation and the nonhuman world, an interest and a respect...a consideration and a deeper ethical care regarding other living beings and the natural world in general, that is very clear. I believe that the experience of meditation makes us realize that we are not separated, we are not separated from anything or anyone, we are not separated from any form of life, whether animate or inanimate, the meditative experience allows us to feel the non-separateness between what we call the self and the world.” (Interview, Paulo Borges, May 2013)

Paulo Borges' words suggest that the practice of meditation leads to the emergence of an extended version of the self, as I argued in chapter VII, allowing the enactment of different ways of experiencing and living in the world, suspending the usual boundaries between self and reality. Meditation can eventually trigger an interest in environmentalism and can also allow environmentalists to explore nondual forms of consciousness that justify different ways of dealing with the nonhuman world, generating what Paulo Borges calls respect and a deeper ethical care.

Secondly, these changes in consciousness and affect support forms of political action and, according to the interviewee, they highlight the engaged dimension of Buddhism:

“I resonate with Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea that engaged Buddhism is the authentic Buddhism. You cannot be a Buddhist if you are not totally aware, if we do not practice mindfulness towards everything that surrounds us, without responding lovingly and compassionately to what the contemporary social reality requires.” (Interview, Paulo Borges, May 2013)

Although the interviewee used the notion of Buddhism and Buddhist to exemplify the connections between experience and social action, contrasting with some of the remarks in chapter II that call for the suspension of the notion of religion, he explicitly suggested that mindfulness is not limited to the self – it should be used to deal with the world, including contemporary social reality, reinforcing its relational dimension (see chapter V). This obviously contradicts the assumption that religious practices are nowadays individualized (Carrette and King, 2005; Davie, 2000), that “religion no longer has a key role to play in the organization of European societies” (Fadil, 2005: 143). According to my interviewee, new practices of the self do in fact contribute to the re-organization of contemporary societies, allowing the emergence of particular experiences that can even lead to the formation of new political parties. Far from being insignificant and only affecting the private life of individuals, these anthropotechnics can be understood as belonging to the set of those new aesthetic practices that Guattari (2000) wrote about while reflecting on ecology.

Finally, practices of meditation can also become tools¹⁹² to foster social transformation. Paulo Borges, inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh’s proposals, created the “Circle of Interbeing”, an association that promotes the teachings and ethical standpoints of the Vietnamese Zen Master. In May 2013, hundreds of people

¹⁹² This has some similarities with Deleuze’s view of theory as a toolbox. According to him, “A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function.” (Deleuze and Foucault, 1977: 208). In the case of meditation, we are dealing with a mediator that has the potential to trigger social change but that can also escape the control of its designers (see chapter VI), it is not a passive tool.

have gathered across Portugal to participate in an event called “Sitting and Walking in Peace and in Silence”¹⁹³, practicing sitting and walking meditation together as an expression of inner and outer peace. According to Paulo Borges, these are nonviolent tools for political change, extending the practice of mindfulness to the social field, contrasting with conventional ways of doing politics, as it has been suggested in this chapter:

“I believe that we need to recreate civic and political action. From my perspective, we have to recreate them from the standpoint of spiritual experience, the experience of meditation. We need to act and to intervene civically, socially, publicly and politically in peaceful, nonviolent and nondual states of consciousness. I believe that it will be the silent revolution of the 21st century. Forms of civic, public and political intervention influenced by meditation will be another aspect of that silent revolution of the 21st century. We have to rethink and recreate political action as a nonviolent action, because the history of political action, the history of politics, broadly speaking has been part of the history of violence. Politics has been a form of violence... If we allow those, like us, who fight for social justice ... for an increasing respect of the environment and the planet ... for animal rights... those who work against the destruction of the planet, natural resources and biodiversity, if we are able to allow those individuals to transform their experiences of indignation, anger, resentment and bitterness into a more open, calm, loving and compassionate mental state, not only for the victims of all this but also for the aggressors, then we will have already won. The victory will be achieved from the very beginning, and then it will only be a matter of time.” (Interview, Paulo Borges, May 2013)

Paulo Borges’ words reinforce the importance of inner/outer entanglements and of emotions in changing social worlds. He suggests, following Thich Nhat Hanh, that it is essential to transform people’s minds, espousing a grassroots model of social change that finds echoes in other proposals (Arnstein, 1969; Freire, 2005; Knabb, 2006; Vaneigem, 2001; Holloway, 2002; Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007). A state of consciousness, emerging alongside particular webs of associations and automatisms, serves as the model for social transformation, affecting a diversity of fields such as agriculture, economics, education, environmentalism and animal rights. Far from being a private practice, as an expression of the subjective turn (McMahan, 2008), meditation practices can become tools to reconfigure social

¹⁹³Due to the success of this initiative, it was repeated in June 2013.

worlds, transforming political action and affecting fields such as environmentalism and human reformation, as in the case of Vipassana.

VIII.V CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the connections between meditation and social change, focusing on three particular aspects – the role of meditation in institutional change (Vipassana in prisons), the couplings between meditation and social action, exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh’s proposals, and the links between meditation and ecology.

I suggested that we should understand these various projects of social change as generated by meditation assemblages, including automatisms, webs of associations and experiences. Broader social issues – human reformation, politics, the environmental crisis – are dealt with according to meditative models of subjectivity and reality, and the self, understood as a microcosm of the world, must be transformed to bring forth long lasting social change. In order to affect the wider world, meditation assemblages are mobilized – the carceral psychogeography is altered through the enrolment of new actants, associations and practices; political action is informed by technologies of the self, such as walking meditation; environmentalism is fostered by practices, insights and ways of being informed by meditation.

The post-humanist analysis employed in this chapter conceives technologies of meditation as mediators that transform social intervention. Instead of focusing exclusively on ideas, I explored the role of practices and experiences in enacting different versions of the social world, suggesting that meditation, instead of being a private practice internalized by neo-liberal subjects in advanced capitalist societies, actively influences a number of worldly interventions.

The interventions fostered by meditation can be understood as nonmodern. Vipassana in prisons contrasts with the paradigmatic model of

discipline for the sake of efficiency and productivity (see chapter II), allowing prisoners to become aware of their bodies and selves; the political vision of Thich Nhat Hanh is highly nonmodern, focusing on affect and the body, suspending habitual distinctions between inner and outer realms, self and the world, politics and aesthetics; the connections between meditation and environmentalism suggest that these technologies and the range of experiences they bring forth can enact a nondual Umwelt, altering human/nonhuman couplings, supporting social action and the creation of ecological parties.

The social and political mediations performed by Vipassana and Zen assemblages highlight the social and political relevance of technologies of the self. This dissertation has analyzed how these practices suspend habitual forms of subjectification, generating nonmodern experiences and ways of being. In this chapter, we have explored the wider ramifications of nonmodern paradigms of subjectivity, turning meditation into a set of practices, experiences, ways of being, associations and actants that have the potential to rethink and re-enact social intervention. If, as we have seen in previous chapters, subjectivities emerge alongside webs of associations and automatisms, institutions and models of social and political action are also mediated by subjective assemblages, affecting the management of space, the performance of sitting and walking, human and nonhuman couplings and political action.

Leibniz criticized the Cartesian version of ontological dualism, proposing a different view of reality where “Every monad is a living mirror which represents the universe in accordance with its own point of view, and is as orderly as the universe itself.” (Leibniz; 2004: 2). Influenced by Leibniz, one could argue that technologies of meditation, once activated in a diversity of settings, set up new automatisms that affect and mediate realms including subjective experience, everyday life, institutional, social and political reasoning and couplings between humans and the environment, influencing geographies, psychologies and the social. The various examples analyzed in this chapter are, therefore, expressions of meditation as a mediator that governs, alters, affects and performs nonmodern paradigms of the self and the world.

XIX. CONCLUSION

“The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (Foucault; 1984a: 50)

“Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots! Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities!” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 24)

XIX.I SUMMARY

Inspired by Michel Foucault's insights on technologies of the self and by STS literature, I explored two practices of meditation. This dissertation addressed two questions: how do Zen and Vipassana assemblages fabricate particular paradigms of people? What are the politics of these new versions of subjectivity and how do they contrast with the modern self?

I argued that Zen and Vipassana rely on two essential devices of subjectification: the transformation of habitual webs of associations and the installation of new automatisms. In chapter IV, I analyzed retreats as transformative settings that rely on new associations between selves, other humans and nonhumans, as well as on the reconfiguration of space, constituting alternative psychogeographies. The reorganization of space, actants, constraints and interactions destabilize selves, supporting meditative dispositions and requiring the suspension of spatial, material and regulatory

instances of subjectification of the outside world, thus enacting new webs of associations.

In chapter V, Performances, I explored the second major device of subjectification, the installation of new automatisms. Subjects incorporate technologies of the self that transform regular automatisms, developing new ways of sitting and eating, focusing on the breath whenever they hear the sound of the bell and being aware of sensations in non-judgemental ways. Practitioners transform their habitual performances through Zen and Vipassana mediations, changing their gaze, altering their pace, modifying their posture, etc.. These heterogeneous devices of subjectification perform new selves through associations with materials, words, energies, spaces and practices.

The transformation of habitual webs of associations and automatisms allows subjects to modify their states of consciousness, tuning in to different frequencies. In chapter VI, I analyzed the experiences of meditators, characterized according to three main aspects – struggles of agency, the feeling of meditation and mystical experiences. The transition to a new paradigm of selfhood triggers pain, boredom, suspicion, discomfort, unease. Bodies and mind rebel and selves struggle to adapt. Eventually, selves replace habitual automatisms, becoming more aware of what they are doing, feeling subtle sensations, tasting the fruits of their effort. In some cases, mystical experiences occur. These reveal a radically different experience of the self and the world – some practitioners report becoming totally aware of what they are doing; others feel their bodies dissolving and the separateness between self and others crumbles – the modern self is suspended.

Zen and Vipassana assemblages mobilize a set of heterogeneous devices to fabricate new paradigms of people, generating nonordinary states of consciousness. Chapters IV, V and VI focused mostly on what happens during retreats or intense periods of practice, whereas chapter VII explored how meditation is transformed into a way of life. In order to become disseminated in everyday life, technologies of the self are transformed into an equipment, plug-ins to be activated in all circumstances. This new equipment establishes new mediations, allowing practitioners to focus on their sensations, to find bells of

mindfulness in the environment and to come back to the breath over and over again. In some cases, the paradigm shift is not peaceful and can lead to unwanted consequences, as I suggested in the section “Meditation and Madness”. The incorporation of a new performative order leads to a number of long-term changes: the development of new levels of awareness (namely towards habit patterns); the enactment of an extended version of selfhood and the emergence of nonstandard phenomena. These three aspects reinforce the novelty of the human paradigm that meditation brings forth, contrasting with traditional accounts of the modern self.

The politics of meditation are not limited to the enactment of a new paradigm of subjectivity; it also influences what is commonly called the “social” (chapter VIII). Meditation becomes a mediator to rethink issues such as human reformation, political action and ecology. In Foucault’s analyses, the Panopticon is a mediator mobilized to reconfigure a variety of social institutions. In order to foster social change, Zen and Vipassana assemblages mobilize their habitual devices of subjectification. Prison settings are modified through the introduction of actants, the reorganization of space and the implementation of new constraints; political action, informed by principles of nonviolence, is supported by the constant mobilization of technologies of the self, such as breathing, walking meditation or the implementation of retreat settings to bring Israelis and Palestinians together. The extended self performed by meditation becomes the subjective correlate of the reconfiguration of human-environment interactions. These couplings were exemplified by the deeply ecological character of Thich Nhat Hanh’s project and by two vignettes: the Council of All Beings and the creation of an environmentalist party in Portugal, influenced by the nondual experiences of its leader.

I argued that the versions of the self and the world enacted by meditation are nonmodern. The experience of meditation contrasts with ordinary states of consciousness, suspending the dualism between mind and body, self and the world, humans and nonhumans; the long term changes enacted by meditation perform a different version of the self: able to develop new levels of awareness, to identify and to be affected by others, experiencing the world in nonlinear ways, overcoming mechanistic conceptions of space, time and matter. The

political projects promoted by meditation are nonmodern, conceiving political subjects as impermanent, able to suspend the self and to identify and develop empathy with and towards others. The ecological projects stemming from meditation exemplify the far reaching implications of new ways of experiencing the self and the world, becoming good examples of the social impacts of Interbeing.

This dissertation was influenced by three major branches of scholarly work. Firstly, meditation research, in particular sociological and anthropological studies. By exploring the webs of associations and automatisms implemented by meditation, I have contributed towards a post-humanist analysis of meditation. This allowed me to avoid the humanist critique of modern meditation as an expression of particular historical trends, coining these assemblages as cults or new religious movements (see chapter I). Instead of drawing on these generalizations, I focused on the practicalities of meditation – how do they create new versions of people? What are the actants, constraints and spaces that are needed in order to transform the environment? What are human selves expected to do with their bodies and minds if they want to practice these technologies of the self? I focused on the technological dimension of meditation – instead of characterizing it as an expression of broader social or historical trends, I explored its devices of subjectification and the effects they can generate.

Secondly, I actively engaged with STS literature. Notions such as actants, programs of action, technologies, performativity and mediation played a relevant role in this dissertation. Meditation was understood as a technology, mediating particular versions of the self and the world. Inspired by the article of Gomart and Hennion (1999), I attempted to contribute to the expansion of the object of STS, mobilizing its insights to study subjectivity. My reflections on Vipassana and Zen highlighted the deeply material and technological dimension of subjectivities, always entangled with spaces, technologies and objects. The post-humanist analysis that this dissertation developed thus contributed to extend current reflections on subjectivity emerging from STS perspectives: instead of focusing on a typical object of western technoscience, I chose the object of meditation, a technology of the self.

Finally, much of this dissertation is an expression of Michel Foucault's reflections on subjectivity, in particular his later work. His remarks on technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988; 2006), his insights on the role of institutions as devices of subjectification (Foucault, 1995), the positive dimension of power (Foucault, 1987; 1995), and the associations between politics and subjectivity (Foucault, 2006; 2010) were valuable contributions, decisively shaping my research. Foucault's analyses were mostly historical, dealing with the genealogies of sexuality (Foucault, 1987), madness (Foucault, 1988b), clinical medicine (Foucault, 2003) and punishment (Foucault, 1995), contributing towards a critical ontology of ourselves. Foucault's later work focused on the aesthetics of existence, "the search for a personal ethics" (Foucault, 1984b: 49) that transforms one's life into a work of art:

"What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" (Foucault, 1984b: 350)

Foucault's own life included many instances of personal exploration, such as going to a Zen monastery in Japan, taking LSD at Zabriskie point, smoking opium and hashish and attending S/M clubs in San Francisco (Miller, 1993). By using different methodologies than Foucault – I resorted to participant observation, semi-structured interviews and my own experience – I studied how practices of meditation transform selves, generating new experiences, new ways of being in the world and new political arrangements. Influenced by Foucault's concerns with the fabrication of subjectivities, I mobilized social sciences methodologies to analyze how paradigm shifts in subjectivity take place in the real, contemporary world, through the analysis of meditation.

After this summary, I will now focus on what I believe is the scholarly contribution of this dissertation, in particular regarding the existing literature about Foucault and post-humanism.

XIX.II CONTRIBUTION OF THE PHD DISSERTATION TO THE EXISTING LITERATURE ABOUT FOUCAULT AND POST-HUMANISM

This dissertation consisted of an empirical exploration of two sets of technologies of the self - mindfulness and Vipassana. The main goal was to extend Foucault's reflections on practices of subjectivity as well as post-humanist STS scholarly work on the self. I will now explain how this PhD dissertation contributed to these fields of research.

Although Foucault, in his later period, was interested in the hermeneutics of the subject and in practices of subjectivity, his research was mostly historical and focused on the western world. Foucault used translations of ancient Greek, Roman and Christian texts to study the evolution of forms and practices of selfhood. His analysis was, therefore, hermeneutical – he basically interpreted these ancient texts, identified the most relevant concepts and analyzed the different usages of these concepts in different historical settings. His primary concern was with the discourse of these hermeneutics of the self, the historical evolution of epistemes that generate subject-positions. On the other hand, my analysis relied on a variety of qualitative research methods – I attended meditation retreats, interviewed practitioners, reflected on my personal experiences, analyzed the socio-technical networks that enact subjective changes, etc.. Instead of focusing on the discursive paraphernalia of meditation assemblages – concepts, words, epistemes, etc. – I analyzed the deeply material, practical and performative dimension of these techniques.

A second aspect deals with the fact that Foucauldian analyses were focused on western technologies of the self – the Platonists, the Stoics, the Christians, etc.. The practices I studied, although they are currently disseminated in the West, are forms of Buddhist meditation. This means that, bearing in mind Callon's principle of free association (Callon, 1986), I looked at non-western forms of meditation as mechanisms of subjectification. This happened because I was interested not in the genealogy of western forms of selfhood – Foucault's main concern – but in the enactment of new experiences, ways of being and forms of social action mediated by particular sets of

technologies of the self. This leads us to the third point of departure from Foucault's work.

A relevant dimension tackled by this dissertation deals with the issue of power. Power, according to Foucault, takes place at every connection, it is a strategical device, becoming a sort of a microphysics - it is basically everywhere (Foucault, 1987; 1995), as we have seen in chapter II. Power, according to Foucault, is deeply enmeshed with forms of subjectification – such as discipline – and it also creates a number of resistances (a good example are the forms of parody explored by Judith Butler, 1990). One could argue that the ubiquity of power prevents social change - since power is everywhere, utopian and alternative assemblages are also forms of power/knowledge and subjection. One of the ambitions of this dissertation, in line with STS concerns with the politics of ontology (see chapter II), was to suggest that the experiences and forms of political action mediated by meditation are positive alternatives to modern assemblages, including modern selfhood (the *homo clausus*) and conventional ways of dealing with the environment (see chapter VIII). In that sense, and although it was recognized that practitioners have to submit themselves to a number of devices of power/knowledge (see chapters IV and V), the affordances generated by meditation were understood as alternatives with the potential to reinvent modern, dualist ways of being in the world. This utopian dimension is missing in Foucault's writings - they consist mostly of historical analyses focused on mainstream devices for the shaping and domestication of the population, including technologies of power – discipline, biopolitics – and institutional devices – the prison, the hospital, the school, etc.. I argued that meditation assemblages display innovative strategies for the reconfiguration of experience and social action, understanding social worlds not as assemblages purely affected by the historical transformation of aprioristic structures - *epistemes* - (Foucault, 2002) but as complex systems that comprise a number of different devices of subjectification and possibilities of selfhood that can in fact be transformed and contested.

The last aspect regarding my contribution towards Foucauldian scholarly work deals with his legacy, how his work was appropriated and how it inspired other authors. In the English speaking world, especially in Britain, Foucault's

reception and popularity was definitely marked by an extension of his analyses of governmentality. The studies developed by Nikolas Rose on psychology, psychiatry and neurosciences (Rose, 1998; 2007; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013), elaborating on the deeply biopolitical nature of contemporary societies, are highly illustrative, reflecting a tendency to extend Foucault's work on contemporary forms of governmentality (Miller, 1987; Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991). What about Foucault's later work on technologies of the self and subjectivity? Although Jeremy Carrette has done a terrific job in trying to use Foucault's insights to study religion (Carrette, 2000) – including religious experience - Carrette's focus is on western forms of religiosity. Moreover, when Carrette attempts to tackle non-western practices, or hybrid practices emerging from the New Age or the human potential movement, he tends to label them as expressions of contemporary capitalism, arguing that they are manifestations of the contemporary political economy of religion (Carrette, 2007; Carrete and King, 2005). A good example is his critique of Abraham Maslow's work on the human potential, suggesting that:

“The (...) establishment of a hierarchy of needs, which has ‘self-actualization’ as its highest achievement, is a clear adoption of the values of individualism and the American dream. The capitalistic sub-structure of Maslow's psychology reflects the ideological weight of knowledge behind the self in Western culture (...)” (Carrette, 2007: 145).

Such a critical and ideological understanding of human experience clashes not only with the post-humanist style of reasoning that guided this dissertation but also with Foucault's understanding of power, which is not a mere expression of economic forces. Carrette's cynicism also extends to the proliferation of meditation practices in the West, which are understood as a form of commodification of religion (Carrette and King, 2005). My attempt to extend Foucault's reflections on technologies of the self, therefore, is not undermined by the assumption that experience is basically an expression of the political economy of religion - it is entangled with human and nonhuman devices that generate ontologies which are irreducible to the sociological/humanist critique of experiential and social alternatives.

In order to extend Foucault's analysis of the topic, I dialogued with Science and Technology studies, and the role of the following paragraphs is to

clarify how I contributed to post-humanist STS scholarly work. Post-humanist literature, in particular in Science and Technology Studies, has historically contributed towards decentred and non-anthropocentric ways of interpreting social reality, recognizing the decisive role of relationalities, performances, nonhumans, particular spaces, etc. (see chapter II). To say that these analyses of social systems are decentred – including ANT and the mangle of practice – is to say that humans are embedded in heterogeneous assemblages – ANT relies on the notion of networks to stress this relevant dimension of associations with nonhumans (Latour, 2005) whereas the mangle of practice focuses on the importance of material agency and its temporal emergence, constantly affecting and being affected by humans (Pickering, 1993 and 1995). These analyses of the practices of scientists and engineers have questioned the picture of the human agent as being in charge of things. Moreover, developments in technoscience and biomedicine have progressively suspended the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. This has led Donna Haraway to claim that cyborgs (Haraway, 1991), hybrids between humans and nonhumans, biology and technology, are a metaphor of post-humanist subjectivities.

Recognizing that post-humanist ways of interpreting socio-technical networks have rarely been applied to the study of human subjectivity, Gomart and Hennion set themselves to apply ANT to the emergence of music and drug amateurs as actor-networks, as we have seen in chapter II. Influenced by ANT and by the mangle of practice, I understood meditation assemblages as relying on a variety of nonhuman devices, associations, spaces, etc., to produce different kinds of selves (Chapters IV and V) - these devices of subjectification do not rely exclusively on human agents, such as the Guru (Goenka or Thich Nhat Hanh). Moreover, I suggested, influenced by the mangle of practice, that meditative experiences are not generated in a linear fashion but rather depend on the increased capacity of meditators to be *affected* by these set-ups, lowering their resistances and being transformed by new performative configurations of reality. This dissertation applied post-humanist STS insights to study self transformations enacted by meditation assemblages, extending Gomart and Hennion's work, thus contributing towards a decentring of STS from its mainstream object – western technoscience.

A relevant dimension of post-humanist STS deals with a concern with ontological politics. Since it is recognized that the world and its entities do not pre-exist their relations (Haraway, 2003), it is argued that reality is an emergent effect of performances, associations and technologies. To say that technologies are not neutral is to recognize that particular configurations of these associations inevitably bring forth particular versions of the world, reminding us of William James' reflections on sub-universes and the multiverse (James, 2007; 1896). Current concerns with the politics of ontology (see chapter II) have some links with these early pragmatist remarks and stress the political dimension of technologies. Relying on Pickering's distinction between modern and nonmodern politics of ontology, I attempted to highlight the deeply nonmodern dimension of meditation. By exploring the experiences generated by meditation, its use in everyday life, the long-term changes it fosters, and by reflecting on the social impacts of mindfulness and Vipassana, I highlighted the essentially nonmodern dimension of these technologies, how they alter the politics of the self and the world. This links to the following issue, the contribution of this dissertation to the constitution of a post-humanist, nonmodern subject.

How does meditation contribute towards the imaginary of post-humanist subjectivities, not bounded by the usual dichotomies between body and mind, nature and culture, self and others, human and nonhuman? Although Haraway's cyborg is an early illustration of a subject that erodes modern dualism and Hennion and Gomart's music and drug amateurs highlight processes of *abandonment*, I believe these two pictures of subjectivity are still limited in constituting a post-humanist self. The cyborg relies on the military-industrial complex and is ultimately an emergent effect of western technoscience, reproducing linear accounts of time, technology and knowledge, and doesn't allow us to radically suspend the ontological boundaries between people and things – in fact, the cyborg increases hubris and mastery, augmenting one's ability to survive in strange, adverse environments, such as outer space (Clynes and Kline, 1995). Gomart and Hennion's experiences of abandonment to drugs and music are interesting to reflect on the relevance of passivity and affect; however, these are ultimately forms of concentration

(resembling states of Samadhi) and they do not tell us much about the politics of ontology, they just describe forms of aesthetic enjoyment.

On the other hand, meditation aims at enacting decentred forms of subjectivity beyond technoscience and aesthetic enjoyment; through the suspension of the self, subjects should become able to realize the entanglements between all existing entities, what Thich Nhat Hanh calls Interbeing. We came across some expressions of Interbeing throughout this dissertation, including experiences of nonduality (chapters VI and VII) and identification with nonhumans (chapter VI). These post-humanist archipelagos of subjectivity, instead of being limited to the hybridization of humans through couplings with technoscience – such as cyborgs – as an expression of hubris, rather promote the embracement of the ubiquitous dances of agency that permeate all becomings (Pickering, 1995; Venn, 2010; Carvalho, 2014). The post-humanist subject of meditation emerges as an attempt to break the identification with the ego – to suspend the *homo clausus* – and to generate an ontological choreography (Cussins, 1996) that can be manifested by embracing trees, experiencing nonduality while meditating or walking peacefully for nuclear disarmament. If the modern self relies on the distinction between body and mind, humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, self and the world, the nonmodern, post-humanist self generated by meditation is an attempt to suspend all these conceptual dualisms and to experience reality in a deeply entangled way. In that sense, the post-humanist self of meditation does not embody the flow of relationalities through couplings with technoscientific apparatuses but through a number of performances, gestures and associations which suspend the dual ontology of separateness, thus performing an entangled, fluid and relational picture of the world - a post-humanist, nonmodern ontology.

This leads us to what I believe is the main theoretical contribution of this dissertation, my general story about the self. Social theory has identified a number of devices that shape selves and minds, including social communication (Mead, 1934), historical transformations that lead to new forms of governance and technologies of power (Foucault, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1998), altering the sense of self, the transformation of manners (Elias,

1978 and 1982), bureaucracy (Weber, 1978), education (Durkheim, 1925; Freire, 2005), social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977), interactions (Goffman, 1969), particular techniques and performances (Mauss, 1973; Foucault, 2006; Butler, 1990), discourse (enacted as direct interpellations (Althusser, 2008; Butler, 1997a) or as the surface of emergence of subjectivity (Foucault, 2002)), couplings between humans and technologies (Schivelbusch, 1977; Haraway, 1991; Latour, 2005; Brenninkmeijer, 2010) and culture (Mauss, 1985; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). This list is far from comprehensive, but it elicits the number of influences, agencies and conditions that perform the self. My interpretation of the self in relation to practices of meditation focused on the notion of automatisms. These are unmediated, automatic phenomena that constitute the self and that include breathing, the flow of thoughts, responses to environmental inputs, habitual ways of sitting and walking and somatic modes of attention (Csordas, 1999) to pain, pleasure, anger and joy. Automatisms emerge in a relational way, involving couplings with the affect of bodies and organs, established ways of regulating and managing subjectivities – education, upbringing, disciplinary and biopolitical devices – and a number of technologies of the self that emerge within cultural, political and historical frameworks. The post-humanist interpretation of the subjectification devices mobilized by meditation explored new webs of associations with inner gazes, nonhumans, spaces, energies, technologies, instructions, regulations. These assemblages are mobilized to alter the self through the installation of new automatisms. Hearing the sound of the bell allows selves to activate mindfulness, stopping and breathing; paying attention to sensations through the mediation of equanimity supports the de-identification between sensorial phenomena and one's self; repeating gathas expressing Interbeing, embracing trees or being able to link the clouds in the sky with the steam coming out of a cup of tea transform habitual connections, generating a more comprehensive and decentred version of the self. Influenced by Uexkull's (2010) notion of "Umwelt" I suggested that these technologies enact novel ways of being in the world, allowing practitioners to establish new networks, connections with the environment, altering their perception of emotions, physical sensations, relationships with co-workers, strangers, family members and nonhumans. The new webs built by meditators, in co-operation with technologies of the self, allow

them to become aware of their automatisms, to transform habit patterns and to experience their bodies, minds and space in novel ways. The automatisms generated by meditation are nonmodern - instead of promoting dualism, they foster a nondual politics of experience that progressively leads to a decentred sense of self, challenging modern dichotomies.

One is inevitably confronted with the question of what the self is. Influenced by Guattari and STS, in chapter V I suggested that models of subjectivity are performative, and selves are enacted through various associations and devices of subjectification. If the worlds of meditation – experiences, meditation in everyday life, social applications – emerge as a result of these new webs, the fundamental question at stake here is not “what is the self?” but “what kinds of selves should be performed?” Informed by the pragmatic assumption that versions of reality are performative and political (Pickering, 1995; Mol, 1999; Barad, 2003; Law, 2004), this dissertation analyzed how environments are reconfigured to bring forth new versions of selfhood that, in turn, influence social systems (Chapters VII and VIII). The maintenance of social worlds is inevitably coupled with the management of selfhood, which reinforces the political dimension of meditation, suspending the dichotomy between individual and social (Carrette, 2007; Blackman, 2012). The two case studies, Vipassana and Zen meditation, allowed me to analyze the micro-politics of subjectification – spatial partitioning, new performances, associations with nonhumans – that are in turn mobilized to enact new versions of selfhood. These new versions of selfhood are mobilized to enact broader social changes – the macro-politics of meditation – relying on the swarming (Foucault 1995) of meditation assemblages and the heterogeneous networks that sustain them. This dissertation was, therefore, an attempt to analyze how these paradigmatic changes are established.

The associations between paradigms of selfhood and the politics of ontology led me to suggest that the versions of reality enacted by meditation are nonmodern; however, a relevant dimension of these projects of the self is to set up retreats, to multiply programs of action, to disseminate technologies and assemblages and to stabilize subjectivities in everyday life. There is a tension

between self-control and transgression that should be tackled, and the aim of the following section is to explore this tension.

XIX.III CONTROL/TRANSGRESSION

I argued that meditation fabricates nonmodern selves, able to overcome dualism, to attain mystical experiences and to develop nondual forms of politics, suspending ordinary states of consciousness, the tenet of modern selfhood. However, meditation is also used to foster self-control. Some of the examples analyzed in chapter VII indicate that meditation is used to increase one's immunological status, helping practitioners to set up protective bubbles that prevent them from being affected by the outside world. In chapter VIII we have seen how meditation is incorporated in prisons in order to fabricate equanimous prisoners, which means that strategies of reformation and incarceration recognize the potential of meditation to tame people more efficiently.

The *Civilizing Process* (Elias, 1978) is certainly a narrative of modernity and modernization as progressively exerting control over people, and Elias has given many examples that illustrate the progressive taming of humans, their emotions, reactions and ways of being. Humans become more docile, sensitive, nonviolent, harmless. Similarly, Nietzsche's critique of morality recognizes that man has been tamed, and that his *will to power*, sometimes expressed as violence and cruelty, has been obstructed by what he calls the social straitjacket (Nietzsche, 2006). Man became a problem for himself when all the desires that were blocked by social formations turned inwards, creating bad conscience:

“All instincts which are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards... against man himself*. Animosity, cruelty, the pleasure of pursuing, raiding, changing and destroying – all this was pitted against the person who had such instincts: *that* is the origin of ‘bad conscience’. Lacking external enemies and obstacles, and forced into the oppressive narrowness and conformity of custom, man impatiently ripped himself apart, persecuted himself, gnawed at himself, gave himself no peace and abused himself, this animal who battered himself raw on the bars of his cage and who is supposed to be ‘tamed’... this fool, this prisoner consumed with longing and despair, became the inventor of ‘bad conscience’.” (Nietzsche, 2006: 57)

Modern man is governed, submitted to rules, regulations, codes of conduct, socially accepted ways of being. Modern man, according to Sloterdijk, is the one who voluntarily lives inside parks –

“Humans are self-fencing, self-shepherding creatures. Wherever they live, they create parks around themselves. In city parks, national parks, provincial or state parks, eco-parks – everywhere people must create for themselves rules according to which their comportment is to be governed.” (Sloterdijk, 2009: 25)

This picture of tamed humans can be found in Elias’ depiction of the civilizing process; in Foucault’s work on discipline and biopolitics, as the two tenets of governmentality; in Sloterdijk’s human zoos and in Nietzsche’s bad conscience as an antithesis of the will to power. One could argue that the contemporary appropriation and popularization of meditation is an expression of the modern will to control, tame, domesticate humans. Practitioners have to be part of meditation retreat parks for a certain period of time, submitting themselves to rules that prevent them from having sex, eating whatever they want, killing other people or consuming drugs (see chapter IV). They have to install automatisms that clash with their “natural” workings, obliging them to sit in stillness for long periods of time, to experience pain, to control how they walk – all dimensions of human existence become prone to meditative domestication. Practitioners have to use these techniques in daily life to avoid harming themselves and others – instead of reacting “normally”, they have to add layers of meditative plug-ins to their everyday behaviour, using technologies of the self to react peacefully, lovingly, etc. (chapter VII). Meditation is even used to improve technologies of punishment, domesticating inmates who now believe they were wrong at the deepest level of reality – they betrayed the law of cause effect, the law of nature, by blindly reacting to sensations. Practices of mindfulness are used to prevent conflicts, taming members of opposing sides, fostering feelings of love and compassion towards the enemy and making humans feel guilty for the environmental crisis, adding new dimensions of pain and resentment to their bad conscience. This would be enough to make Nietzsche turn in his grave!

There is obviously a different account to be told. Much of Elias' and Nietzsche's analyses depend on a version of man that exists before repression and internalization, an expression of the will to power that is an essentialism, since it assumes that, somewhere in the past, there was some sort of free man immune to social and moral conditionings. Moreover, and although modernity has disseminated those technologies of government that tame humans – they go to school, take vaccines, learn the common language, don't usually kill other people, etc. – at the same time there is no human being *free* from any type of influence. Suggesting that modernity is the age of domestication is a reverberation of the old humanist critique of institutions, bureaucracies and technologies that generate the so-called iron cage, domination, total mobilization, etc.. The sun, the wind and human organs are also sources of domination – power is not a modern invention. The ontological conception of power in Foucault, as suggested in chapter II, allows us to understand it as a force that permeates every connection, every network and webs of associations. The type of control that is required to practice meditation can be understood as an active effort to suspend those connections that hold the self together. The type of freedom granted by meditation is not an unmediated Yes to all impulses but the suspension of a bounded notion of selfhood, the ability to experience nondual phenomena and interconnectedness, and the possibility of de-identifying with a narrow sense of self.

Meditation allows practitioners to transgress the habitual, dominant paradigm of the modern self. This form of transgression contrasts with other understandings of this concept – for Georges Bataille, transgression deals with war, sacrifice, eroticism (Bataille, 1962); Sade's transgression is to say yes to all impulses, inverting Christian norms – one kills, rapes, kidnaps, tortures, etc. (Sade, 1965); for Artaud, transgression involves a radical transformation of theatre and its opening to cruelty, affection and the mobilization of bodies (Artaud, 1958). The kind of transgression that meditation brings forth deals with the multiplication of reality, prompting non-ordinary states of consciousness that allow us to realize that there is no natural, unmediated state of mind or of enacting the Umwelt. Instead of becoming an expression of the will to power, saying "yes" to all the impulses and wishes emerging from an essentialized

version of the human self, meditation tells us that there is no such thing as a natural political subject, a state of consciousness unaffected by technologies, matter and nonhumans or a non-mediated way of behaving in daily life. As this dissertation suggests, it is all about mediations, human-technology couplings; by analyzing the processes of subjectification used by Zen and Vipassana assemblages, we became aware of how these associations are strategically mobilized in a number of situations – the retreat setting, everyday life, institutional and political spheres.

A relevant dimension of the humanist critique of western meditation is that it is a reflection of contemporary narcissism, individualism, the subjective quest for authenticity (Lasch, 1979; Taylor, 1989). In western culture, the self has been a problem for itself since immemorial times – the famous Delphic maxim of “Know thyself” (Foucault, 2006) existed in ancient Greece long before the recent proliferation of yoga studios and meditation centres in the West. The re-emergence of the care of the self, coupled with the political technology of governmentality (Rose, 2007) has, in some occasions, transformed meditation (in particular mindfulness) into the new opiate of the masses (Dawson and Turnbull, 2006), eager for well-being, self-control, inner peace, etc., some of the themes mentioned by participants in chapters VI and VII.

My concern here is with the potential of meditation to become a technology for the critical ontology of ourselves, following Foucault’s call (Foucault, 1984a). How can meditation allow us to transgress the historical, social, corporeal and mental limits imposed on us?

There are no easy answers, but I suggest that meditation, and technologies of the self in general, can support the proliferation of nonmodernity. The focus of modernity is on standardization, homogenization and normalization through the dissemination of technologies of government. Modernity, as an attitude (Foucault, 1984a) that aims at stabilizing humans and territories through technologies such as discipline and biopolitics, can be countered by the technologies of the nonmodern self (Pickering, 2010). These technologies – meditation, psychedelic drugs, radical forms of theatre, shamanism – have the potential to alter the sense of self, transgressing the

habitual boundaries of time, space and sobriety that characterize ordinary states of consciousness, the mental correlates of modern forms of power.

XIX.IV TOWARDS PERFORMATIVE INCOMMENSURABILITY

In “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions”, Thomas Kuhn used the notion of incommensurability to exemplify a conflict, and lack of coincidence, between the viewpoints of proponents of different paradigms. He highlighted three main reasons: firstly, they (the scientists) have different standards or definitions of science; secondly, there is a misunderstanding between the two paradigms because “Within the new paradigm, old terms, concepts, and experiments fall into new relationships one with the other” (Kuhn, 1962: 149); finally, the proponents of different paradigms also practice in different worlds:

“One contains constrained bodies that fall slowly, the other pendulums that repeat their motions again and again... Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction.” (Kuhn, 1962: 150)

I’m particularly interested in exploring performative incommensurability (Pickering, 1995) to counter the modern tendency to standardize and normalize. According to Pickering, radical performative incommensurability suggests that “within different cultures human beings and the material world might exhibit capacities for action quite different from those we customarily attribute to them... our own powers as human beings might be bound up with culture” (Pickering, 1995: 245).

Recently, Pickering has explored performative incommensurability in relation to new forms of technology that, instead of aiming at domination and control, rather seek to engage in dances of agency with the world (Pickering, 2010). The modern paradigm of reality is characterized by devices of translation, normalization, proliferation. Compulsory education, the medicalization of childbirth, the emergence of media such as television and the

internet, satellites and the National Forest Inventory (a survey led by the Brazilian government to estimate the number of trees in the Amazon rainforest) are expressions of the modern will to expand, control, assess, standardize, enacting one world.

Technologies of the nonmodern self should be able to counteract this tendency, multiplying altered states, new nonstandard phenomena and realms of experience that fMRI's and the medical gaze would be unable to understand. This program of radical performative incommensurability would produce a multitude of human subjects who would not be sharing the same common world, capacities or frequencies. Instead of bringing the collective together, technologies of the nonmodern self would multiply it, producing incommensurable experiential effects, clashing with regular mechanisms of subjectification and power.

Much of today's politics deals with normalization, and education is probably the single most powerful tool to assure the homogeneity of the human flock, everyone tuned in to the same frequency, performing in commensurable ways. According to Feyerabend, "A free society is a society in which all traditions are given equal rights, equal access to education and other positions of power" (Feyerabend, 1993: 228). This would radically alter the purposes of education:

"General education should prepare citizens to choose between the standards, or to find their way in a society that contains groups committed to various standards, but it must under no condition bend their minds so that they conform to the standards of one particular group." (Feyerabend, 1993: 161)

Feyerabend criticizes how education, in modern democracies, has been co-opted by special standards, including scientific ones, suggesting that students should have access to many worldviews. Although his proposal still relies on the existence of a curriculum, compulsory education and country-wide efforts to introduce subjects to multiple perspectives, this would give students the possibility of becoming acquainted with many paradigms of knowledge and performance. Influenced by Feyerabend's insights on education and the hegemony of science in the contemporary world, one could argue in favour of

multiple possibilities for action and experience, allowing citizens to have access to wide range of technologies of the self that would bring forth new realities. The nonverbal humanities that Huxley wrote about (Huxley, 1963) would occupy a central role in these societies, giving subjects the chance to experience a wide range of frequencies beyond ordinary states of consciousness. Such a project seems to have started to emerge during the 1960's. However, in contemporary austere societies there isn't much room for transgression and altered agencies beyond those forms of enhancement that seem to create improved versions of humans.

Zen and Vipassana assemblages "multiply social worlds" (Callon, 2006: 53), reconfiguring associations, implementing new automatisms, altering experience and everyday life; they inform new ways of tackling social issues. The research program of performative incommensurability would include STSers, philosophers, sociologists, meditators, shamans, psychonauts, anthropologists and people from the "hard" sciences interested in creating different worlds, combining their efforts to perform new iterations of the real, supported by chemical, performative and mystical archipelagos. Not only should citizens be given access to all these new realms but there should be a sustained effort to unveil, multiply, fabricate new ontologies, instead of trying to homogenise the human flock. Cushions, isolation tanks and entheogens might be the material support of this project, allowing us to explore and be affected by new couplings, recognizing that the experiential realms they perform are as legitimate as those versions of reality naturalized by ordinary states of consciousness.

XIX.V THE LIMITATIONS OF THE THESIS AND THE CONVEYABILITY OF MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE

Before I conclude this dissertation, I would like to offer a word of caution. As I stated in chapter III, the perspective this dissertation offers is that of a beginner. My own standpoint as a recent and relatively inexperienced meditator

affected the outcome of the thesis. Indeed, some of the most advanced experiences with meditation – such as enlightenment – were not explored in this dissertation.

In chapter VI I laid out an outline to interpret meditative experiences, influenced by the mangle of practice, according to three main moments: struggles of agency; the tuning in of meditative agency and mystical experiences. This framework allowed me to organize the experiences shared by informants. However, there are dimensions of meditative practice that are ineffable, untranslatable, difficult to grasp through language. These can include sensations that available languages have not yet defined; experiences that should not be shared due to their secret or intimate dimension or that are only available to those with decades of serious meditative practice.

As I mentioned in chapter III, I came across some problems in finding Vipassana practitioners who were willing to be interviewed. This led me to a sample of approximately 25 subjects, and a number of them were beginners such as myself. This decisively conditioned the research, in the sense that most of the experiences I recorded and analyzed were shared by those with a limited number of years of practice. As I argued, this was highly useful and insightful in order to analyze the paradigm shift brought forward by meditation, as well as to explore struggles of agency as a sort of ontological clash; however, there are realms of meditative progress that take years (one could even say lifetimes) to attain. According to D. T. Suzuki, the evolution of Zen practice is usually compared to cow-herding, and there are ten very famous plates that depict such a process, including different stages such as looking for the cow, seeing the traces of the cow, seeing the cow, coming home on the cow's back or entering the city with bliss-bestowing hands (Suzuki, 1949: 371-376). It has been argued that even extremely skilful western practitioners have strong difficulties to overcome the initial stages (Preston, 1988), therefore the experiences that were analyzed in this dissertation are a limited account of meditative practice.

Moreover, one should question the conveyability of meditation as a research topic, its potential to be comprehended and appropriated by scholarly research. As I wrote in chapter III, one of the difficulties I encountered during my

first retreats was precisely to abandon my academic/conceptual mindset. As Johnson (2002) argues, the academic mind is supported by what he calls the scholar-shaping techniques whose goal is the development of the capacity to conceptualize, discuss, compare, contrast, etc.. One of the tenets of meditation is precisely the suspension of the ordinary mind and of its main tenet - conceptualization. As Goenka puts it, Vipassana is about reality as it is, without conceptualization or judgement. Moreover, Thich Nhat Hanh's practices of mindfulness aim at enhancing the experience of the present moment, instead of fuelling the conceptual, thinking mind – when the mind is agitated one is invited to listen to the bell or to take some deep breaths. In sum, one could argue that meditative ontologies radically contrast with scholarly ones – instead of attempting to label, categorize, separate the world according to concepts, they aim to foster embodiment and anatta, not-self, Interbeing.

The use of language in meditative settings is usually aimed at enacting this non-conceptual way of being – Thich Nhat Hanh's gathas are forms of reinforcing Interbeing, the awareness of the entanglement between all existing entities, and Zen koans can be paradoxical, creating shock or confusion to bring about awakening through the suspension of the *res cogitans* (Kapleau, 1989). The elusive nature of meditation requires us to humbly accept our limitations as scholars operating in the conceptual realm, a sub-universe (James, 2007) of the vast multiverse (James, 1896) that constitutes reality. It has been recently recognized that ignorance is, in fact, a constitutive dimension of academic research (High, Kelly and Mair, 2012; Rappert, 2014), and meditation, since it deals with a number of ineffable experiences, is certainly a good example of a difficult subject to tackle and comprehend.

As I argued in chapter III, we should replace Wittgenstein's maxim by "What we cannot experience we must pass over in silence". As a recent and relatively inexperienced mediator, it has to be recognized that there are certain ontologies of meditation that I must pass over in silence, replacing the conceptual hubris of scholarly investigation by the humble recognition of the ineffability of meditative worlds. The translation, appropriation and objectification of such experiences would certainly be a form of *trahison* (Law, 1999). According to Derrida (1967), western metaphysics is a metaphysics of

presence, and philosophy is a form of logocentrism, leading to the apprehension and objectification of the world. Human speech is the main drive of this logocentric metaphysics of presence and, according to Derrida, it should be replaced by a metaphysics of difference, what he calls *différance*. This nonmodern, non-objectifying metaphysics, instead of relying on speech, rather depends on the human ability to listen; Derrida draws upon the physical configuration of the human tympanum to illustrate a nonmodern way of doing philosophy and of being in the world:

“We know that the membrane of the tympanum, a thin and transparent partition separating the middle canal from the inner ear (the *cavity*), is stretched obliquely (*loxos*). Obliquely from above to below, from outside to inside, and from the back to the front. Therefore it is not perpendicular to the axis of the canal. One of the effects of this obliqueness is to increase the surface of impression and hence the capacity of vibration...

Consequently, to luxate the philosophical ear, to set the *loxos* in the *logos* to work, is to avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of *anti-*, or in any case to inscribe *antism* and overturning, domestic denegation, in an entirely other form of ambush, of *lokhos*, of textual manoeuvres.” (Derrida, 1982: xiv-xv).

The *tympanization* of philosophy, as suggested by Derrida, requires us to be humble before these asymmetrical *différences*, which become metaphors for mindfulness (Rappert, 2014), inviting us to develop new writing and research strategies that pay tribute to the ineffable dimensions of meditative experience.

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